

Former UN weapons inspector denounces Bush war plans against Iraq

Scott Ritter speaks at Oakland University in Michigan

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Former United Nations chief weapons inspector Scott Ritter denounced the Bush administration's war preparations against Iraq at a public appearance in the Detroit area last week. Some three hundred students, faculty members and others attended his December 2 speech at Oakland University, near Pontiac, Michigan.

An ex-US Marine and CIA intelligence officer who served as a weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998, Ritter is well placed to expose the lies of the Bush administration about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction. He has consistently argued that US charges of Iraqi possession of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons are groundless.

Ritter quit the UN inspection team in 1998 and later confirmed Iraqi charges that the US was using the inspectors to spy on Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi leaders. In December 1998, the US ordered the inspectors out of Iraq and within 24 hours began bombing the country, using the information gathered by the inspectors about Hussein's security to target him for assassination.

After quitting, Ritter became a vocal critic of the economic sanctions devastating Iraq and an opponent of US military intervention in the country. He has testified before several European parliaments and in September he spoke before a half-million antiwar protesters in London. In October he toured several US states and spoke before large audiences to oppose the congressional vote granting Bush power to wage war against Iraq.

Because of his oppositional stand, Ritter's public appearances have been largely ignored by the news media, consistent with its policy of censoring voices critical of Bush's war drive. The major news outlets boycotted Ritter's December 2 appearance at Oakland University.

In his remarks to the audience, Ritter predicted that the US would be at war with Iraq by Christmas. A war that would cost tens of thousands of US and Iraqi lives would be launched, he said, even though "the Bush administration hasn't provided any information to substantiate its

allegations that Iraq has any of these weapons."

He reminded the audience that in October, as Congress was debating war powers authority, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other administration officials held a series of briefings trying to make the case that Iraq represented a threat to the US and the world. "They put photographs before the press that they said were missile testing sites, where Iraq was testing a long-range missile. They showed a rebuilt factory, where they said Iraq was producing biological weapons. The Nasser state establishment, they said, is where Iraq is producing centrifuges, and on and on."

But in the first week since weapons inspectors returned to Iraq, Ritter said, "they've inspected every one of those sites and did not find a thing." He added, "It's not as though the Iraqis cleaned them up. The inspectors say nothing had been going on in these facilities for four years." Ritter further asked, "If Rumsfeld had information about Iraqis hiding weapons, why wasn't he sharing this information with the inspectors on the ground?"

He told the audience, "Presidents lie to the American people," and cited the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson used false claims that the US had been attacked by the North Vietnamese to get war powers authority from Congress. "That led to a 10-year nightmare, the death of 58,000 Americans and two million Vietnamese," Ritter said.

Virtually all of Iraq's weapons capacity was destroyed in the 1991 Gulf War and the ensuing seven years of inspections, Ritter told the audience. Whatever biological agents may have survived only had a shelf life of a few years, and have been rendered harmless. By 1996 the inspectors had accounted for 90-95 percent of Iraqi weapons capability and overseen the destruction of 100 percent of the factories used by Iraq to produce weapons of mass destruction, Ritter continued.

He made it clear that the Bush administration was not

interested in disarming Iraq, but in waging war against the country and occupying it. If inspections were allowed to proceed and Iraq was declared free of weapons of mass destruction, he said, UN sanctions would be lifted and Iraq would be reintegrated into the international community, with Saddam Hussein still in power. "This is the last thing the Bush administration wants. That is why the inspections are being used to prepare the way for war," he said.

Any serious inspections would take six months to a year, Ritter noted. But the window of opportunity to strike Iraq was between December and March, because of weather. "That's why it is imperative that we have a trigger for military action soon. That trigger will come on December 8 when Iraq submits its declaration. The Bush administration will say Iraq's failure to declare a weapons program is a material breach justifying military action, and American forces will go to war."

The plans for war were being carried out without the slightest public debate or discussion, Ritter said. The American people are given no real information about Iraq by the US media, which echoes the White House's claims without question.

During a press conference prior to his speech Ritter said, "The media has shown a collective cowardice to confront the administration" and demonstrated a "horrific disregard for facts and for the truth." He recounted how CNN's editorial board grilled him for one hour and 45 minutes before declaring him a credible source. Reporters would never challenge Bush, Cheney or Rumsfeld in the same way, he said. "They make a statement about the threat that Iraq poses and not a single reporter will ask a tough question."

In his speech at Oakland University, the former weapons inspector condemned Democrats and Republicans in Congress for granting Bush unilateral power to wage war, and doing so on the eve of a national election. They took the question of war off the table, he said, so it could not be discussed and decided upon by the American people.

Ritter denounced efforts by the Bush administration to intimidate its opponents with charges that they were aiding terrorism. He said the Patriot Act and Homeland Security provisions were threatening constitutional rights and establishing a "dictatorship." Moreover, he said, the administration was using the "war on terrorism" to implement Bush's doctrine of American unilateralism and preemptive military strikes.

"This means the US will take advantage of its overwhelming military and economic strength to impose its unilateral will on the world. We don't care about international law. We only care about what's good for the US and we are willing to impose this on the world. There is another term for this: imperialism," he said. "That is a

difficult term for Americans to accept because over 220 years ago we fought a revolutionary war to liberate ourselves from an imperial power. Yet that is the way we are perceived around the world."

Ritter concluded by saying, "If we allow our elected representatives to get us involved in a war that is not just, then we are no longer a democracy worthy of the title. This is a defining moment in American history. How we as a people allow our government to proceed will define not only how we interact with the rest of the world, but how we proceed as a nation."

At his press conference, Ritter spoke of growing tensions within the US military over the policies being pursued by the White House, and widespread anger against civilian officials at the Pentagon like Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz.

This reporter asked Ritter whether he was receiving support from sections of the military or the intelligence establishment. He responded, "I don't know how much support I have in the Pentagon. I do know this: two recent commanders of Central Command, including General Zinni, have come out against this war. In fact, anybody who has worn a uniform and served his country in time of war has come out against this war. Why? Because we know what war is about. We understand it is about killing. It's about death. It's about destruction..."

"George W. Bush ably flew F-102 fighter aircraft over Houston during the Vietnam War. Dick Cheney found the Vietnam War 'inconvenient' for his political career. Well, Mr. Cheney, I'd like to know how inconvenient will the war in Iraq be for the thousands of American youth who will be slaughtered in Baghdad? Or for the tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians who will be slaughtered?"

The enthusiastic response from the Oakland University audience expressed growing disquiet and opposition in the US population to Bush's war-mongering policy. Though a self-described conservative Republican who voted for Bush, Ritter himself has no doubt been influenced by the growing anti-war sentiment in the US and internationally, and concerns over the trampling of Constitutional rights in the US.



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