

Incident in Alexandria: Antiwar outpouring in the Pentagon's back yard

A reporter
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The corporate-controlled American media routinely repeats the claim that the people of the United States, by at least a two-to-one margin, support the Bush administration's drive to war in Iraq. Opinion polls in the United States are notoriously subject to manipulation by the media and those who commission them, who frame questions and twist answers to produce the picture of the public mind which is desired.

A remarkable but little-reported event on Monday evening, in the Washington suburb of Alexandria, Virginia, gives the lie to these claims and demonstrates the growing public suspicion of the Bush administration and its hostility towards the headlong rush into war.

The occasion was a town meeting, "Terrorism and the Possible Conflict in Iraq," called by Congressman James Moran, a Democrat who opposed the Bush administration's Iraq war resolution last October, but co-sponsored a Democratic alternative supporting war if sanctioned by the United Nations. Joining him were two Pentagon representatives: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke, chief spokeswoman for Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Major General Kevin Kuklok, Marine Corps Assistant Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies, and Operations.

The high-level Pentagon delegation stems from the location of the meeting: Alexandria is adjacent to the Pentagon, and the Department of Defense employs more than 7,000 residents of the city. While the city has many immigrant workers from Latin America and Asia, and votes Democratic in local and national elections, the Bush administration chose to move the cases of John Walker Lindh and Zaccarias Moussaoui to the federal district court there to insure selection of a pro-government jury.

Given the social composition of the city's population of 133,000, the attitude towards the Bush administration and war with Iraq is all the more significant. Monday's meeting at the Minnie Howard School drew a huge crowd, largely middle class professionals, filling the auditorium and forcing hundreds into the school cafeteria where they watched the discussion on closed-circuit television.

Attendance was vetted as much as possible: people with antiwar signs were told they could not bring them into the meeting, and known opponents of the war were pointed out to security guards to "watch." Despite these precautions, however, the meeting quickly became a debacle for the Pentagon.

Congressman Moran praised the presentation by Secretary of State Colin Powell before the UN Security Council and said that

he believed Saddam Hussein did indeed possess chemical and biological weapons. His main criticism of the Bush administration was that it was giving Iraq higher priority than North Korea and that it was not asking the American people to prepare to make sacrifices. "We've been given tax cuts and told to spend them at the malls," he complained.

Open skepticism greeted Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke. The audience audibly snickered when she said Bush had made no final decision about military action against Iraq. "Yeah, right," an elderly woman said out loud.

The first person to speak from the floor was a Kurdish-American woman from Iraq. "Saddam Hussein has gassed my family," she said. "He has cruelly bombed my brothers and sisters. I know what this man is capable of. Our children suffer. I am a mother and I am against the war. Against it! It will solve nothing."

There was loud applause, and she concluded, "I think the attempt to link this to September 11 is false. It's a means of playing on the sympathies of people."

These comments set the tone for the rest of the evening. Not a single person rose to defend the administration's policy or advocate immediate war against Iraq. The audience repeatedly cheered those who spoke out against war or asked, like one woman, why the United States didn't join with other countries in eliminating all weapons of mass destruction, including its own.

Some of the comments were reported in press accounts or recorded by C-SPAN, which broadcast the session:

A Gulf War veteran: "If Clausewitz's premise is true, ('War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means,') then what are the smart politics that are going to work in the area after we bring the tanks in, when we are throwing a brick in a hornet's nest? What is our politics towards the countries where supporters of 9/11 came from, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt?"

A Vietnam veteran: "I know what 'clear and present danger' means and I don't see the 'clear and present danger' of Iraq. When you say the Iraqi threat is imminent, what do you mean by imminent—a month, a year, 10 years? I woke up in Tay Ninh one morning and half a North Vietnamese division was on our doorstep. Now, that's a clear and present danger. But I don't believe Saddam Hussein today presents a clear and present danger to the United States."

The audience—clearly including many veterans of previous US wars—broke into sustained applause as this veteran pointed out that those leading the United States into war had never experienced it

themselves: “George Bush, hawk, did not fulfill his National Guard duty; Dick Cheney, hawk, did not serve; Paul Wolfowitz, hawk, did not serve; Richard Perle, hawk, did not serve.”

Steve Dujack, editor of an environmental publication, said, “If you live in Cincinnati, you’re not likely to be the subject of a terrorist attack. Here it’s already happened. So our concern is real. What happens as a result of Iraq is real.

“I was very much a supporter of the first Persian Gulf War. I thought our strategic interests were at stake. Iraq’s move into Kuwait was naked aggression. I thought there was a legal justification for war. But this war seems unabashedly put forth by a president to advance his political interests.”

One questioner went to the microphone to express sheer incomprehension of the administration’s case for war. “They are looking at something and saying it’s an apple; I see a tomato,” he said.

John Clark of Reston, Virginia expressed concern over the thousands of Iraqi civilians who would die in a war, and the likelihood that the United States would be forced to occupy the country for years after the conflict ended. “I’m very much against the possibility of war. I don’t think we’re in imminent danger from Iraq,” he said.

An Iranian-American woman asked rhetorically where the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq came from. “You supplied it,” she answered. “Why should Iraqi people suffer?” she asked. “Does the UN have mandate for two-thirds of Iraq allowed for no-fly zone, attacked every day? Has Israel ever followed UN resolutions?”

Some speakers from the floor simply denounced Bush personally. “Someone tell Bush that Oz is having a sale on brains,” one woman shouted. Another spoke against the proposed Patriot Act II, which would give Attorney General John Ashcroft increased powers to order spying and secret detentions against American citizens. “It’s made me think a lot about George Orwell lately,” she said. “It’s more like the Gestapo to me,” another woman replied.

The response from the platform was confusion, defensiveness and hostility. Clarke responded to repeated questions about what threat Iraq could pose to the United States by answering, “That all depends on what you mean by imminent.” According to one press account, Clarke “answered several different questions in the exact same way; with a statement that ‘18 different European countries agree with the US re: Saddam,’ with a shake of her head once and a drink of water.”

Although the Marine Corps major general conceded that such a tumultuous meeting was “the essence of the republic,” Congressman Moran was more dubious, suggesting that the multitude of hostile questions were the reason more such town meetings were not held. He later declared that opponents of the war were overrepresented at the session, although he admitted that messages to his congressional office were running two-to-one against war.

The *Washington Post*, which declared in a news story Sunday that Powell’s presentation to the UN Security Council had convinced the American people of Iraq’s guilt, did not report the Alexandria town meeting. One *Post* columnist, Courtland Milloy,

drew attention to it, and the Associated Press, C-SPAN and the local Washington indymedia.org all filed reports.

The event was ignored by the *New York Times* and the national television networks, even after the *Los Angeles Times* ran a lengthy account, commenting that “the citizens of Alexandria spoke of overwhelming concerns about war with Iraq, and particularly its aftermath. Their antiwar sentiments sounded like those heard in France and Germany.”

Alexandria, because of its proximity to the Pentagon, is a particularly striking example of the depth of opposition to a US war against Iraq in cities and towns throughout the country. In the run-up to the February 15 antiwar demonstrations, dozens of city governments have adopted resolutions deploring the rush to war and opposing any unilateral US attack on Iraq.

In Chicago, where the mayor, Richard Daley, is the son of the Democratic Party machine boss who unleashed police on Vietnam War protesters in 1968, the board of aldermen adopted an antiwar resolution by 46-1. Other large cities which have passed such resolutions include San Francisco and Oakland, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Gary, Indiana; Des Moines, Iowa; Portland, Maine; Baltimore, Maryland.; Detroit, Kalamazoo and Traverse City, Michigan; Jersey City and Newark, New Jersey; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Rochester and Syracuse, New York; Akron and Cleveland, Ohio; Philadelphia and York, Pennsylvania.; Multnomah County (Portland) and Eugene, Oregon; Providence, Rhode Island; Burlington, Vermont; Seattle and Tacoma, Washington; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The state legislature in Maine passed a similar resolution, as did the state house of representatives in Hawaii, where much of the US naval force assembled to attack Iraq is based.

Many college towns were among the first to adopt such resolutions, including Berkeley, Palo Alto, Santa Cruz and Santa Clara, California; Boulder, Colorado; New Haven, Connecticut; Evanston and Urbana, Illinois; Bloomington, Indiana; Amherst and Cambridge, Massachusetts; Ithaca, New York; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Oberlin, Ohio; Corvallis, Oregon; Charlottesville, Virginia.; and Madison, Wisconsin.



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