

The New York Times' brief for war against Iraq

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In the buildup to war against Iraq, the editors of the *New York Times* have postured as “responsible” allies of the growing antiwar movement. Their modus operandi has been to castigate those elements who denounce the impending war as an act of imperialist aggression, while advocating a “healthy debate” about “nuanced” differences with the policy elaborated by Washington.

With its editorial statement on the impending war, “Power and Leadership: The Real Meaning of Iraq,” published February 23, the *Times* has dropped this pretense, coming forward openly as a mouthpiece for American imperialism, while offering a bit of friendly tactical advice to the Bush administration.

It is a bloated piece that appears to have been dictated by a committee and then patched together by a re-write man. Rambling on for two entire columns and running the length of the editorial page, it adopts the habitual *Times* pose: dressing up a predatory US policy in the language of high-minded morality and international principles.

It is a thoroughly dishonest statement, riddled with contradictions, which makes clear that this erstwhile voice of American liberalism is at one with the Bush administration in its desperate desire for war.

Published on the eve of an attempt by Washington and the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to force through another Security Council resolution authorizing an attack, the editorial vents the newspaper’s hope that the coming slaughter will be sanctified by the United Nations. But if these efforts fail, it leaves no doubt that the *Times* will back a war just the same.

“Right now, things don’t look promising for those of us who believe this is a war worth waging, but only with broad international support,” the *Times* laments. It notes that the “invasion force is in place, and the military’s schedule seems to demand that it attack within a few weeks.”

The editorial uncritically echoes the Bush administration’s claim that its only aim is to protect America and the world from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Why is it that most of the world’s governments—not to mention the vast majority of the world’s people—fail to accept this claim as genuine? The editorial blames this on a wily Saddam Hussein’s supposed success in drawing “the United Nations into a game of find the handkerchief, in which the burden is on the inspectors to track down mobile laboratories or sniff out hidden weapons.”

It is the *Times*, however, that is performing a verbal sleight-of-hand. Who has proven the existence of mobile laboratories? The chief UN weapons inspector dismissed Secretary of State Colin Powell’s assertions that such rolling labs were being operated by Iraq. US claims of concealed weapons have likewise failed to pan out whenever the inspectors have visited supposed hiding places identified by US intelligence.

The *Times* seizes on the current controversy over Iraq’s Al Samoud 2 missiles, which the UN inspectors claim exceed a 90-mile range imposed after the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Iraq insists that once equipped with warheads and guidance systems, the missiles cannot go further than the allowed distance.

This side issue, the paper suggests, could serve as the final with the UN telling Hussein “he must let the inspectors watch him get rid of his missiles immediately, or outside forces will do it for him, with the support of the international community.”

The recourse to the missile issue raises to new heights the cynicism that has pervaded every aspect of the US war drive, including the diplomatic maneuvering within the UN Security Council. The issue arose precisely because Iraq provided the UN inspectors with data on the missile test results—a clear example of cooperation with the inspections regime that the country is supposedly defying. Either way, Iraq will be found guilty as charged.

The demand that Iraq destroy its short-range missiles takes place as the US and Britain are readying a massive assault that the American military itself has dubbed “shock and awe.” At the moment, Iraq is surrounded by some 150,000 US troops equipped with thousands of missiles, each capable of traveling hundreds of miles to wreak death and destruction. Under these conditions, with the entire country bracing for the coming onslaught, it is demanded that the Baghdad give up one of its decidedly inferior weapons systems.

To add to the grotesque fraud, Bush made it clear on February 22 that an agreement by Baghdad to give up the missiles would not alter the US invasion timetable one iota.

The *Times* editorial proceeds to cram nearly every pretext advanced by Bush administration for war into a single paragraph: “Although many Americans are puzzled about why the Bush administration chose to pick this fight now, it’s not surprising that in the wake of Sept. 11, the president would want to make the world safer, and that one of his top priorities would be eliminating Iraq’s ability to create biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Of all the military powers in the world, Iraq is the one that has twice invaded its neighbors without provocation and that has used chemical weapons both on its military foes and some of its own restive people.”

Iraq, the newspaper claims, is the only military power to have twice invaded its neighbors without provocation. Really?

How many military interventions and invasions has the US carried out over the two decades since the onset of the Iran-Iraq war? Well over a dozen, and not just against neighbors, but in the most far-flung corners of the world. It has attacked, bombed, waged terrorist war, or occupied Nicaragua, Panama, Grenada, Haiti, Somalia, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and the various fragments of what was once Yugoslavia. It now has troops participating in counterinsurgency campaigns from Colombia to the Philippines.

This is in addition to the three million Vietnamese killed in a 10-year US war in Southeast Asia. The current plans to invade and conquer Iraq are the culmination of two decades of escalating US militarism. It is hardly any wonder that recent polls in Britain and elsewhere show that Bush is seen as a far greater threat to world peace than Saddam Hussein.

In any event, the US, as the *Times* well knows, generally backed

Saddam Hussein in the war with Iran and tacitly sanctioned his use of chemical weapons.

The *Times* goes on to suggest that Washington is justified in invading Iraq because it has an obligation to ensure “that no other despotic governments run by irrational adventurers get hold of nuclear arms.” There is an obvious question posed by this assertion: who will be next? Will a war against Iraq be followed by an invasion of Iran, which by all accounts has a far more developed nuclear program? No one can rule out nuclear capabilities being acquired by Syria, Libya or a half-dozen other potential targets to be branded as “rogue states.”

Next comes an example of hypocrisy and intellectual poverty that is extraordinary, even for the inveterate dissemblers of the *New York Times*. The editorial chastises the Bush administration as follows: “All too often, American officials have undermined their own case by demonstrating reckless enthusiasm for a brawl, denigrating allies who fail to fall in line or overstating their case against Iraq, particularly when it comes to a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.”

In other words, the administration is guilty of war mongering, international bullying, and wholesale lying. The editorial at a later point reiterates that Bush is lying about Saddam Hussein’s alleged ties to Al Qaeda, noting that popular support for the coming war is “thin as a wafer and based on misapprehension that Iraq is clearly linked to terrorism.”

Here the *Times* admits that the fragile support Bush has for his war on Iraq is based on government lies. This, however, does not prevent the *Times* from peddling as gospel truth the rest of the Bush administration’s war propaganda.

Indeed, the newspaper lauds the White House for its diplomatic “skill” and legal sensibilities in taking the case for war to the UN. The very next sentence of the editorial declares that “to his credit, President Bush worked hard to achieve unanimous support of the Security Council for Resolution 1441...” This is followed by praise for Bush having shown himself “willing to give the United Nations both time and space to make up its mind.”

Further on, the *Times* expresses the hope that after the US military conquers Iraq it will “unearth proof of a large nuclear program, stockpiles of terrifying biological weapons and real evidence of serious collusion between Saddam Hussein and international terrorists,” and thereby vindicate the war.

But why should anyone believe the postwar “proof” of a government that systematically lied to the people before the war? The *Times* is either oblivious to this glaring contradiction in its own argument, or is so contemptuous of the public it believes it can get away with any sort of driveline.

One word never appears in the *Times* argument for war: oil. This is not an oversight. Just last month the newspaper’s chief foreign correspondent, Thomas Friedman, penned a column entitled “A war for oil?” [See *New York Times*] Thomas Friedman: “No problem with a war for oil”]

Friedman merely acknowledged, with his trademark fusion of cynicism and swinishness, what most people already know: “Is the war that the Bush team is preparing to launch in Iraq really a war for oil? My short answer is yes.”

Yet, in what clearly is meant to be the *Times*’ definitive statement on the prospect of war in Iraq, the three-letter word never appears. This in and of itself brands the editorial as a deliberate effort to conceal the real war aims of the American ruling elite in Iraq.

The editorial goes on to list the newspaper’s apprehensions and concerns over a war undertaken without the political cover of UN sanction. It makes some damning admissions, including the fact that “much of the world has begun comparing [the US] to ancient Rome” because of its unilateral use of military power. It sanctimoniously cautions, “The test now is whether we will find a new way to exercise our power in which leadership, self-discipline and concern for the common

good will outweigh our smaller impulses.”

The *Times* discretely avoids any description of these “impulses.” Perhaps its editors have in mind plans to hand over Iraqi oilfields to the US energy giants and turn US military rule of the country into a bonanza for American contractors.

The editorial concludes with unctuous words about “the real test of American leadership,” urging the Bush administration to “use our influence to unite [the world] around a shared vision of progress, human rights and mutual responsibility.”

Even hypocrisy should have some limits. The Bush administration’s has elaborated a “vision” of preemptive war to pursue unchallenged domination of the world’s markets and resources. Notwithstanding the *Times*’ enthusiasm for UN backing, whether or not Washington succeeds in bribing and blackmailing enough countries on the Security Council to push through a UN resolution will not change in the slightest the imperialist and aggressive character of the coming invasion.

Nor will it stop the fracturing of world capitalism into increasingly hostile blocs. While the European and Japanese ruling classes are insufficiently powerful at the moment to check US imperialism’s ambitions, the road that the Bush administration is taking inevitably leads towards a new world war. Only the emergence of an independent revolutionary movement of the international working class can halt this process.

A major consideration in the *Times*’ lobbying for UN sanction of the war—one that is not raised openly in the editorial—is fear of possible war crimes prosecutions. The editorial hints in this direction, warning that a US intervention in Iraq “could go terribly wrong, very quickly. The war could be brutal and protracted.”

Among more astute sections of the American ruling elite, there is undoubtedly concern that the unprovoked slaughter they are about to carry out against a defenseless country falls entirely within the legal definition of a war crime, no different in essence from the first charge—planning and waging a war of aggression—for which the Nazi regime was tried at Nuremberg. UN sanction would provide some legal protection against potential war crimes charges.

The value of such a resolution, however, is limited. Whatever happens at the UN, the violence, death and destruction that is being prepared against the Iraqi people will create a powerful constituency among the working people of the entire planet for bringing all those responsible to justice.



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