

Powell's UN speech triggers countdown to war against Iraq

The WSWS Editorial Board
6 February 2003

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's brief for war against Iraq, delivered Wednesday to the United Nations Security Council, was the latest act in a diplomatic charade laced with cynicism and deceit. The event was predicated on a colossal lie: that the coming invasion is about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and Baghdad's supposed threat to US security and world peace.

All of the assembled delegates were well aware that the Bush administration is committed to carrying out a war for which the most reactionary sections of the American political establishment have been clamoring for more than a decade, and that there is nothing Iraq can do to prevent it.

It is a war of colonial conquest, driven by a series of economic and geopolitical aims that center on the seizure of Iraq's oil resources and the assertion of US global hegemony. Not since the 1930s, when fascist Italy raped Ethiopia, Imperial Japan seized Manchuria and Nazi Germany annexed Austria and the Sudetenland, have imperialist powers so brazenly bullied and attacked weaker countries.

The Security Council meeting was staged on false pretences. The American media had promoted the event as a the pivotal moment when the man of the hour, Powell, would unveil secret intelligence to prove to skeptical allies and reluctant Arab regimes that Iraq was defying the UN and had to be "disarmed" by force.

In reality, the Bush administration had few illusions that the recycled charges and unsubstantiated allegations crammed into Powell's hour-plus speech would be taken by international leaders as good coin. Powell's own desultory performance underscored the hollowness of his arguments.

The overriding purpose of the exercise was to shift public opinion within the US, which is increasingly opposed to the Bush administration's war drive. The White House and Pentagon concluded that they could diffuse domestic anxiety and hostility to their war plans only by intensifying their pressure on the UN to sanction the coming invasion. Such a course would have the added benefit of giving recalcitrant Security Council members such as Russia and France, as well as Democratic Party leaders at home, political cover to drop their criticisms and line up behind the war.

The administration was assured in advance of enthusiastic support from a servile and war-crazed media, which could be counted on to portray Powell's speech as a "devastating" and "irrefutable" case for military action, regardless of its content.

The speech contained no new or verifiable evidence to substantiate Washington's charges that the Iraqi regime has amassed chemical and biological weapons and forged an alliance with Al Qaeda. Most of its key allegations have already been refuted, in some cases by US and British intelligence sources and the weapons inspectors themselves.

"A typical American show, complete with stunts and special effects," was the apt description given by General Amer Al-Saadi, the Iraqi regime's chief scientific advisor.

A litany of lies

Among the most cynical lies was Powell's claim to be upholding the authority of the UN and the sanctity of international law. Even as he spoke, the US was building its troop strength in the Gulf to more than 100,000, amassing hundreds of warplanes and assembling a naval armada in the region. Just last week the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff admitted publicly that the US already has troops in northern Iraq, a direct breach of the UN resolution passed last November, which prohibits violations of Iraq's national sovereignty. This is the same resolution the US is invoking to justify its war drive.

Only eight days before Powell's speech, Bush declared in his State of the Union address that America would not allow "others" to determine its policies. The president thus restated the US position that it is not bound by any international laws or institutions, and is prepared to attack Iraq with or without UN approval. Powell gave the Security Council an ultimatum: sanction the coming war or place itself "in danger of irrelevance."

The secretary of state began his presentation by citing Resolution 1441, and concluded by lying about Washington's motives in pushing for the resolution last autumn. He declared, "We wrote 1441 not in order to go to war, we wrote 1441 to try to preserve the peace."

In fact, the US initially opposed the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq, because it saw it as an impediment to an early invasion of the country. Finding itself isolated internationally, the Bush administration agreed reluctantly to demands for a new resolution and the resumption of inspections. But it insisted on provocative language that would strip Iraq of its last shreds of sovereignty and impose such onerous conditions as to make compliance, as a practical matter, impossible. Thus the US, under cover of weapons inspections, fashioned a new legal pretext for war.

The first charge leveled by Powell in his speech was that the Iraqis were involved in an elaborate strategy of evading inspections and concealing weapons materials and manufacturing facilities. To substantiate this allegation, he played two audiotapes of conversations between unidentified males speaking in Arabic, which he alleged represented a conspiracy by Iraqi military officers to hide weapons.

The tapes, unintelligible to the vast majority of those who heard them, were presented with no context, nor any verifiable identification of those whose voices were heard. While the words are open to interpretation, referring to a "modified vehicle" in one instance and instructions not to mention the words "nerve agent" in another, there is no way of knowing if the tapes themselves are genuine. They could have been made in a sound studio in Langley, Virginia, or they could involve a careful editing of words actually spoken by Iraqi officers.

Powell went on to display blowups of satellite photos, claiming they showed "active chemical weapons bunkers" and trucks being used to conceal weapons materials. He was, however, compelled to admit that the photos "are hard for the average person to interpret, hard for me," and

could only be understood by “experts with years and years of experience poring over light tables.”

The weapons inspectors already possess similar satellite imagery, if not the identical photos. Nevertheless, they maintain they have found no such evidence of concealment of active weapons programs.

Powell’s use of taped telephone intercepts and spy satellite photos raised an obvious question that none of the media commentators addressed. Washington is continually monitoring virtually every inch of Iraq from the air, is able to intercept the most sensitive telephone conversations, has spies on the ground, and scores of weapons inspectors arriving unannounced at factories, government offices, farms and private residences. If, as the US claims, Iraq is hiding vast stores of chemical and biological weapons and producing new weapons of mass destruction, why is the secretary of state—despite the massive US surveillance—unable to produce physical proof of a single such weapon?

There is only one plausible answer: the US government is employing the technique of the Big Lie.

Spying operations

The Iraqi military has ample cause to distrust the inspectors. During the last round of inspections, it was established that US intelligence agents were secretly accompanying the UN teams and using the process to prepare attacks on Iraq. Information gathered was also relayed to Mossad, the spy agency of Israel.

In a similar vein, Powell charged that Iraq’s refusal to allow American-piloted U-2 spy planes to conduct surveillance over the country was another proof of guilt. The demand that the country submit to this spying operation is made even as US and British warplanes conduct daily bombing raids—in violation of the UN resolutions on Iraq—in the so-called “no fly zones” imposed over the north and south of the country. The purpose of these attacks is to eliminate all of Iraq’s air defense capabilities in advance of a US invasion.

Meanwhile, leaked Pentagon reports have revealed plans for an aerial bombardment of Baghdad that is to be more horrific than anything seen since the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. Some 800 cruise missiles are to be fired into this city of five million during the first two days of a US attack, more than all such weapons used during the entire 40-day Persian Gulf War a decade ago.

In any event, it is not true that Iraq has rejected the U-2 flights. It has agreed to them, on the condition that the US and Britain suspend their flights in the no-fly zones while the spy planes are operating. The US has flatly rejected any such condition.

As further evidence of a lack of cooperation by Baghdad, Powell cited the refusal of Iraqi scientists to participate in a US scheme to spirit them out of the country for “interviews” with the CIA. He attributed the lack of participation in this bizarre proposal solely to the threat of retaliation from Saddam Hussein. That scientific professionals in Iraq might not want to help the US prepare a war that will claim the lives of thousands of their countrymen and reduce Iraq’s cities to rubble is not, according to the US, a possibility worth discussing.

The “most worrisome” discovery supposedly made by US intelligence was the existence of mobile biological weapons labs that are allegedly moved around the country on trucks and railroad cars to avoid detection. The evidence of the existence of these rolling labs came, he said, from Iraqi defectors.

The day before Powell’s speech, Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix dismissed the US claims of mobile laboratories, as well as the charge that Iraqis were moving prohibited materials out the back door as

inspectors were coming in the front. He noted that the inspection teams perform extensive and sensitive tests, taking air, soil and water samples that would reveal traces of chemical and biological materials at a suspected site, even if the materials had been removed. Blix said that samples tested—including at sites identified by US intelligence—have provided no evidence of prohibited materials.

In relation to both chemical and biological weapons, Powell charged that the Iraqi regime had failed to account for thousands of liters and hundreds of tons of materials dating back to the Iran-Iraq war more than 15 years ago. The vast majority of Iraqi weapons materials from this period were either expended in the Iran-Iraq war itself, destroyed in the Persian Gulf war of 1991, or incinerated by weapons inspectors in the last inspections round. According to former inspector Scott Ritter, this accounts for between 90 and 95 percent of these materials.

Even if it were true that Iraq had managed to hide what little remained, most of these substances have a shelf life of five years or less, meaning that they would now be useless. What facilities Iraq had for producing these weapons were destroyed more than 10 years ago, and there is no evidence whatsoever that any new facilities, which would be extremely difficult to hide, were ever created.

On the allegations concerning an Iraqi nuclear arms program, Powell regurgitated old US allegations—already rejected by UN inspectors—concerning Iraq’s purchase of aluminum tubes that he said were to be used as centrifuges for enriching uranium for nuclear weapons production.

Acknowledging that experts in the field had rejected this charge, the US secretary of state asserted that the Iraqis were seeking out higher standard tubes, and claimed this was evidence of guilt. He noted that the last batch detected by US intelligence included an “anodized coating” on their surface. Nuclear experts, however, have pointed out that this coating would actually interfere with the tubes’ use as centrifuges, and would have to be removed if they were employed for this purpose.

Al Qaeda allegations

To buttress the US case, Powell repeated the discredited claims that Iraq is secretly abetting Al Qaeda terrorists. Initially, US officials claimed that Iraq was complicit in the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, citing reports of a meeting of the plot’s alleged ringleader, Mohammed Atta, with an Iraqi diplomat in Prague. This “evidence” was subsequently repudiated by both US and Czech intelligence officials as a fabrication.

Powell’s new “proof” was undercut by a British Broadcasting Corporation report the day of the speech citing a British intelligence document that dismissed any relation between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda.

Powell’s case supporting such a relationship was built on an improbable amalgam, citing the existence of an Islamist group in northeastern Iraq—where the US maintains its no-fly zone and Baghdad exerts no control—and claims that figures linked to Al Qaeda had been spotted in Baghdad.

There are two sources for these unsubstantiated charges. The first is the Kurdish authority in the northeast of the country, which is fighting a low-level civil war with the Islamists and has ample motive to tie them to the Saddam Hussein regime.

The second, as acknowledged by Powell, consists of the detainees seized by US forces in Afghanistan or abducted from other countries and handed over to allied governments for interrogation. These people are being held incommunicado, in solitary confinement, without being charged or tried,

and without access to lawyers. Numerous reports, including some in the American press, have acknowledged the use of psychological and physical torture against such prisoners. The testimony of such individuals, even if its existence were independently verified, would not be credible.

Finally, as proof that “Saddam Hussein and his regime will stop at nothing until something stops him,” Powell repeated the charge that the Iraqi regime deliberately massacred 5,000 Kurdish men, women and children in 1988, using chemical weapons to kill them.

Once again, Powell’s allegations were debunked in advance by evidence to the contrary, offered, in this case, by Stephen Pelletiere, who was the CIA’s senior political analyst on Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. In a column published January 31 in the *New York Times*, Pelletiere responded to this same accusation leveled by Bush in his State of the Union speech.

The gassing of Kurdish civilians in the town of Halabja, he wrote, took place in the midst of a battle between Iraqi and Iranian forces, both of which were using chemical weapons against each other’s troops. “The Kurdish civilians who died had the misfortune to be caught up in that exchange,” he wrote. “But they were not Iraq’s main target.”

He went on to note that the US Defense Intelligence Agency conducted its own study of the incident and issued a classified report charging that it was Iranian—not Iraqi—gas that killed the Kurds.

To this it need only be added that Powell’s ally to the north of Iraq, Turkey, has for more than a decade been conducting a bloody war against its own Kurdish population.

Within minutes of Powell’s speech, leading Senate Democrats such as Joseph Biden of Delaware and Diane Feinstein of California were proclaiming it an unanswerable indictment of Iraq, preparing the way for their party to line up behind the war that is now only days or weeks away.

The entirely predictable trajectory of the Democrats underscores the fact that opposition to the impending slaughter in Iraq and future imperialist wars cannot be based on any section of the political establishment. It requires a struggle for the independent mobilization of the American working class in unity with the workers and oppressed masses internationally against the capitalist system that breeds militarism and war.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact