

Faced with popular resistance

US prepares for slaughter in Iraq

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With the failure of the Bush administration's war strategy to secure either the speedy collapse of the Iraqi regime or the support of the Iraqi people, the Pentagon is preparing to dramatically escalate its onslaught against the country's civilian population as well as its military.

It was announced Tuesday that British Prime Minister Tony Blair will arrive in Washington Thursday for a day of meetings with Bush. In the wake of significant setbacks for both British and US forces, and with a battle pending in Baghdad that may claim many thousands of civilian lives, the conference at Camp David has the character of an emergency war council. The logic of events on the ground in Iraq is pushing the two imperialist powers toward a far bloodier war, with enormous political consequences.

After five days of heavy bombing and the advance of US forces to within 50 miles of Baghdad, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hinted at the mounting difficulties confronting the US and British invaders. "We're still, needless to say, much closer to the beginning than the end," he told a Pentagon press briefing. "This campaign could well become more dangerous in the coming days and weeks."

Rumsfeld was repeatedly questioned as to whether the administration had deceived the American people into expecting a quick and virtually bloodless war of "liberation."

"Not me," Rumsfeld replied, disavowing responsibility for promoting the "shock and awe" strategy that was touted to the media by his aides. This strategy was based on the conception that an intense, carefully targeted bombardment could bring about the implosion of Saddam Hussein's government through either assassination or mutiny, while leaving the Iraqi military largely intact as the basis for a new US-dominated regime.

Its execution consisted of repeated aerial assaults on key "command and control" installations and other sites viewed as centers of power of the Ba'athist party leadership. This has been coupled with a psychological warfare campaign aimed at convincing both the Iraqi people and the military command that the end of the regime was inevitable.

Part of this psychological warfare effort was Washington's spreading of false reports of the death of Saddam Hussein, the death or defection of his key deputy, Tariq Aziz, and the repeated claims that high-ranking Iraqi officers were in negotiations on the terms of surrender. This was supplemented by the bombardment of the country with some 25 million leaflets urging Iraqis not to resist.

The "embedded" US media also played their part in this effort, presenting an image, beamed to Baghdad, of an unstoppable US armored juggernaut approaching the Iraqi capital at breakneck speed. This was to be coupled with scenes of Iraqi civilians in southern Iraq welcoming advancing US and British troops as liberators, together with the mass surrender of Iraqi military units.

In less than a week, the contradiction between the underlying assumptions of this strategy and reality have become painfully clear. Underlying this disconnect was the fact that the Pentagon's political

leadership had become the victim of the Bush administration's own propaganda. The more Washington churned out pretexts for toppling the Iraqi regime and demonized its leadership, the more it came to believe that the regime would simply collapse at the first show of force.

Instead, the key personnel in the Iraqi regime have shown themselves to be quite alive and seemingly confident. Mass surrenders have not materialized—even the Pentagon claims only some 3,500 Iraqi POWs. And, instead of being greeted as "liberators," US troops have faced determined resistance from irregular forces—including substantial numbers of armed civilians—which have repeatedly attacked military convoys.

There is an undeniable element of heroism in this resistance in the face of overwhelming military power. The claims of the US military—which has done the bulk of its killing with cruise missiles fired from hundreds of miles away and with war planes flying out of reach of Iraqi guns—that the actions of the so-called fedayeen are a violation of "civilized" norms of war ring hollow. The Iraqis are, after all, fighting on their own land against an enemy that—without any provocation—has come from thousands of miles away to conquer them. Under such circumstances, they can hardly be faulted for seizing any means to fight back.

In the small port city of Umm Qasr, which the British claimed to have captured in the first hours of the war, fighting has dragged on for five days, making it impossible to utilize the docks to unload both military and humanitarian supplies. To quell resistance, air strikes and artillery barrages were called in, largely demolishing the town.

In Nasiriya, where at least 10 US soldiers have been killed in the last 48 hours, fierce resistance has continued, despite intense bombing raids.

Basra, which US and British forces initially intended to bypass in the rush to Baghdad, has also been targeted for attack because of Iraqi actions against the invasion force. Iraq's second-largest city with a population of 1.5 million people, Basra was expected by the Pentagon to welcome the invaders, given its Shi'ite population's repeated rebellions against the regime of Saddam Hussein. Instead, it became another area of "scattered resistance," to use the phrase preferred by US military spokesmen.

Iraqi sources reported at least 77 civilians killed by US-British bombardments in Basra, and several hundred wounded pouring into poorly supplied hospitals.

United Nations officials have warned that the city is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, with the lives of over 100,000 children under five at risk because of the lack of safe drinking water. The city's water supplies and electric power were both cut off as result of the US-British attacks.

Washington and London have attributed the hostile reaction in Basra and the rest of the south to memories of the aftermath of 1991 Persian Gulf War, when George Bush senior urged the Shi'ite population to revolt, but then thought better of it and allowed the Iraqi army to brutally suppress them.

With sketchy reports of renewed anti-government unrest in Basra, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld made clear the current Bush administration's

lack of enthusiasm for such a development. "I am very reluctant to run around the world encouraging people to rise up," he said. Washington is well aware that its plans for a post-Saddam occupation entail the suppression of any popular movement.

Independent observers in Iraq have stressed that the invasion has triggered popular anger among the Iraqi people and a determination to oppose foreign conquest, despite hatred for the regime in Baghdad. Perhaps most striking is the fact that the predicted surge of Iraqis heading for the borders has not materialized. Instead, there has been significant traffic going the other way, with Iraqis living in Jordan, Syria and elsewhere heading home with the aim of fighting the Americans.

The killing and capture of US and British troops in the south of the country, combined with the downing of a US Apache helicopter and fierce battles in a whole number of areas, have led to sharp criticisms from within the military establishment over the strategy devised by the Pentagon leadership.

Senior uniformed commanders had argued from the outset for a much larger military force—the current deployment comprises barely half the number of troops used in the 1991 Gulf War. Rumsfeld and the civilian officials advocated the use of much smaller forces, relying heavily on special operations units and advanced military technology.

To a large extent, these differences were ideologically driven. The extreme right-wing elements that have taken the reins at the Pentagon under the Bush administration have long argued for the unfettered application of military power in redrawing the geopolitical map of the Middle East to suit US imperialist interests. Their mad vision of American military might and free-market economic policies transforming the world excludes any objective estimation of mass popular opposition.

Retired senior military commanders like Gen. Barry McCaffrey, a key commander in the 1991 Gulf War, have publicly criticized the Pentagon for failing to deploy sufficient forces, while active-duty officers have done so privately. Some have blamed the stunning ambush that resulted in the capture of five US support troops and the killing of several others on the failure to deploy additional forces to protect the military's long supply line from Kuwait.

The headlong rush to the Iraqi capital, ironically described by some military personnel as the "Baghdad 500," has left a substantial section of the invading military forces dangerously exposed, with significant hostile Iraqi forces to their rear.

The failure to supply additional armored units can be attributed in part to the overwhelming worldwide opposition to the war. In Turkey, this opposition prevented the government from allowing the US military to send in the 4th Infantry Division from the north. Military cargo ships carrying the unit's armor and equipment are still sailing from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea after the Turkish parliament refused to allow a land invasion from Turkish soil.

Another source of conflict between the uniformed and civilian leadership is differences over the importance of "force protection." Since losing 55,000 troops and facing a catastrophic breakdown in morale during the Vietnam War, the US military has clung to a doctrine based on the use of overwhelming force, so as to minimize American casualties. Thus, in 1991, the US conducted a six-week air war, pounding the Iraqi military with B-52 bombers before sending ground troops into Kuwait.

As far as Bush and the civilian leaders within the Pentagon are concerned, US military lives are eminently expendable. Indeed, battlefield deaths are to be welcomed as a means of expunging the "Vietnam syndrome," which involves what they consider a squeamish aversion to American casualties. "Blooding" the American troops is for this administration a necessary step in implementing a policy of "preventive war" on a global scale.

Bush has quite literally lost no sleep over the young people killed in this predatory war. According to White House sources, he is keeping his

normal schedule, sleeping soundly every night, reserving ample time for workouts in the gym, and weekendening at Camp David. After all, those who are dying are not the children of the corrupt and wealthy elite with whom he associates.

Following the losses suffered by US forces in the south, there are growing indications that the Pentagon is preparing a shift in military strategy and a loosening of the invading forces' rules of engagement regarding Iraqi casualties, both military and civilian. B-52 bombers flying out of Britain are increasingly being used to hit troop positions south of Baghdad. Some 1,400 air sorties were scheduled on Tuesday. Pentagon sources claimed that elements of the 7th Cavalry killed 300 or more Iraqis in a single engagement, without specifying whether the dead were regular troops or armed civilians.

Rumsfeld, meanwhile, indicated that the US would begin targeting Iraqi television and radio stations in retaliation for the broadcasting of reports on US losses and the airing of footage showing American POWs.

Washington is already fashioning the rationale for mass killings. It has categorized all those civilians resisting US forces as either Iraqi soldiers out of uniform or "terrorists," as Rumsfeld put it Tuesday. Many of the American soldiers, having been told that they would be greeted with flowers for "liberating" the Iraqis, no doubt feel betrayed. While some will begin to question the justifications presented to them by their commanders and the Bush White House for their presence in Iraq, others will be inclined to vent their anger on the civilian population.

US officials are also citing unspecified intelligence reports that the Iraqi forces are prepared to use chemical weapons once the invaders cross a line south of the capital. Military sources have indicated that faced with a threat of chemical attack, the US military would drop all restraints on attacking civilian areas. Just as "weapons of mass destruction" provided a pretext for the invasion, the claim that such weapons could be used against US troops serves as a justification for the unrestrained use of firepower against heavily populated urban areas.

Even the so-called "precision" bombings have caused the deaths of scores, if not hundreds, of Iraqi civilians. Correspondents in Baghdad report that with each civilian killed and each home destroyed, anger against the American and British forces is growing. They acknowledge that the city's residents are in no mood to greet the invaders as liberators.

The unraveling of the US military strategy in just five days of warfare represents a colossal failure of the Bush administration's political perspective. War, as Clausewitz famously stated, "is the continuation of politics by other means." For this government, however, it is the continuation of gangsterism by other means. The economic plunder and corporate malfeasance carried out domestically is being translated into a predatory war of aggression abroad. In both cases, the pursuit of narrow self-interest by a corrupt ruling elite is leading to catastrophe.

The assault that Washington and London are preparing against Baghdad, a city of five million people and an historic center of the Arab world, will be an act of barbarism comparable to the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet-bombing and napalming of Vietnam, and the war crimes of the Nazi regime in World War II.

The impending military actions will only redouble the revulsion felt by masses of people throughout the world, including within the US itself, for the predatory war launched by Bush and Blair.



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