

US seizure of Baghdad provokes political crisis in France

Alex Lefebvre
21 April 2003

American military successes in Iraq have provoked severe factional conflict within the French ruling elite. The government, mostly backed by the official left parties, faces violent feuding within its own right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Majority). The foreign policy of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin is itself in disarray, seeking simultaneously to appease the US and build up an independent European position.

After it was clear that Iraqi resistance in Baghdad was failing, President Chirac lost no time in praising the slaughter and the occupation of Iraq. Chirac announced on April 10 that he “rejoiced” at the fall of Baghdad to US troops. He subsequently added that a “democracy” could never fail to rejoice at the fall of a dictatorship. In his speech to the United Nations on April 7, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin stated: “The American and British military presence in the region enforces our collective will.”

French ruling circles have not completely abandoned hope that they will be able to profit from the occupation of Iraq and whatever reconstruction takes place there. The French business federation, Medef (Movement of French Enterprises), has formed a lobbying group to fight for French companies’ access to Iraqi contracts. The big petrochemical company, TotalFinaElf, has repeatedly pointed out that its superior geological studies of Iraq give it one year’s lead-time over its competitors in developing and exploiting Iraq’s oil resources.

However, there is increasing recognition that the US will likely block French corporations from any large share of the war profits and treat France with increasing hostility. When US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said that France should “pay the price” for its opposition to the US war by facing non-repayment

of Iraq’s outstanding debts, French officials replied that they did not want to “engage in polemics.” US Secretary of State Colin Powell, often viewed as a moderate, constraining influence on the Bush administration, has already indicated that France will suffer US political and commercial retaliation.

Ernest-Antoine Seillière, head of the Medef, made an appeal to the US on April 15 not to boycott French goods. “If there are people who don’t like the way France behaves in diplomacy, they should send telegrams to our embassies—not stop buying our bottles, our yogurts or our airplanes,” he declared.

The French government has made desperate appeals for a greater UN role in the “rebuilding” of Iraq, with an eye to granting French companies a larger share of the spoils and trying to calm popular anger in France and the Middle East caused by the US occupation.

French officials have sponsored renewed contacts with Great Britain, with whom relations were very strained at the beginning of the war. On April 9, British Foreign Minister Jack Straw and de Villepin met in Paris to discuss the role of the UN in postwar Iraq. Straw announced that Britain would “ask for new resolutions in the Security Council confirming [Iraq’s] territorial integrity and setting up an appropriate post-conflict administration.”

In the face of the US government’s firmly announced intention not to let the UN administer Iraq and its initial steps in installing a puppet regime, such declarations have little value. However, for the French government their principal function is to stitch the European alliance back together and obtain influence on the US through Great Britain.

François Goulard, a UMP parliamentary representative, told *Le Monde*, “The English can play the role of intermediaries ... [one must] explain the

French position to the Americans [and for this] one needs a re-established European harmony.” He called for the formation of a European “pole” to balance US geopolitical power.

The warming of Franco-British relations has a definite military content. France has announced a late April summit with Belgium and Germany to begin integrating their armed forces under one command. However, the press criticized these plans: Great Britain is the largest military spender in Europe, with France a close second, but Germany and Belgium are not major military spenders. Some commentators likened an integrated European force without Great Britain to a European monetary union without Germany.

Like most of the government’s foreign policy, however, an initiative to include Great Britain is not entirely credible. Trying to absorb Great Britain—currently the major pro-US power in Europe—into a military command that is supposed to constitute an independent European counterweight to the US will obviously create serious political problems.

The crisis in world politics and French foreign policy triggered by the US invasion of Iraq has led to open warfare between vying factions of the ruling conservative parties. An anonymous member of the UDF, which did not entirely merge into the UMP last year but which is part of its ruling coalition, told *Libération* that France “will be isolated, we are going to pay very, very dearly for having been in the losing camp.”

Pierre Lellouche, a pro-American UMP representative, said France should ditch any moral or legal considerations in an attempt to mend relations with the US: “We must cease this ideological war with the US around the international legality of the war and not get isolated in a culture of ‘nyet.’”

Discussion circles within the UMP launched by Alain Madelin, former head of Droite Libérale (DL—Free-Market Right, a party with links to crypto-fascist elements), are reportedly focusing pro-American activity. The *New York Times* recently quoted Madelin as saying, “France made a bad choice, a miscalculation [...] in thinking that this war would be long, difficult, and spark chain reactions in the Arab world.”

Prime Minister Raffarin, a personal friend of Madelin and longtime member of DL, tried to calm the situation by telling UMP members “there are subjects about

which polemics are useless.” However, the African magazine *L’intelligent* claimed that “[Raffarin’s] friends are persuaded that his position [in a government led by Chirac] is the only thing that keeps him from expressing his doubts” as to the wisdom of French diplomatic maneuvers.

The question of Franco-American relations is splitting the UMP along powerful political fault lines, as the more openly authoritarian, pro-American elements line up against the traditional representatives of conservative bourgeois politics. The rise of de Villepin’s political stature and approval ratings in France during the pre-war negotiations with the US has led to some speculation that Chirac may be grooming him as a potential presidential successor. This would cut across Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy’s widely rumored presidential ambitions. Chirac and Sarkozy have already sparred over foreign policy issues, most notably when Sarkozy tried to arrange a trip to Algeria before Chirac had done so. Before the formation of the UMP, Sarkozy ran for office several times on DL tickets.

Significantly, the left has turned out to be a more reliable supporter of Chirac than the right—a political situation resembling that of the 2002 French presidential elections. Jean-Marc Ayrault, head of the Socialist Party’s parliamentary group, said that Chirac “should tell us what is needed to build the peace.” The party’s national secretary, François Hollande, mirrored Chirac’s line exactly: he declared that he “saluted Saddam Hussein’s fall [...] but it will be necessary to count all the victims of this war,” adding that the UN was the only institution with the international legitimacy to organize an Iraqi government.

The national secretary of the French Communist Party (PCF), Marie-George Buffet, also applauded the fall of Baghdad and called for an international conference on Iraqi reconstruction under UN auspices. Their reaction to the Iraq crisis shows how thoroughly the official French left has aligned itself with Chirac and his hand-picked forces of social reaction.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact