French concessions on Iraq met by US threats

Alex Lefebvre
1 May 2003

France's latest concession to US militarism—an offer to suspend UN sanctions against Iraq—has provoked only more threats and intimidation from senior officials in the Bush administration. This reaction, a continuation of the bullying tactics employed against Paris since it began opposing the US-led war against Iraq in the UN Security Council, leaves no doubt as to how Washington intends to run European, and indeed international, affairs in the coming period. It is working to split Europe, seeking to isolate and humiliate any state that tries to assert its independence from US policy.

Weeks of French statements applauding US military successes in Iraq and attempts by Paris to mend Franco-American relations carried no weight with administration officials and their conservative Republicans advisers. On April 21, Bush administration officials held a meeting to discuss US options for punishing France. National Security Administration and State Department officials attended, as well as two influential hawks on Vice President Richard Cheney's staff, I. Lewis Libby and Eric Edelman.

The French government has now offered substantive concessions. Previously, it had insisted that any lifting of UN sanctions against Iraq for weapons violations would have to await a renewal and completion of UN weapons inspections as well as a Security Council vote. This position put significant political pressure on the Bush administration, since UN inspections in Iraq risked further exposing the mendacity of US claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction used to justify launching the war. On April 22, France abandoned this position, agreeing to immediately suspend the UN sanctions. It insisted only that a permanent lifting of the sanctions would have to await verification of Iraqi disarmament.

That night, Secretary of State Colin Powell—often touted as the "moderate" in the Bush administration—advocated political retaliation against France. Asked by US public television interviewer Charlie Rose whether a country that opposed US policy, such as France, would face consequences for its actions, Powell immediately and bluntly replied, "Yes!"

The next morning, State Department officials confirmed that Powell's statement had not been an error, but reflected official policy. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that the consequences for France would be "more than philosophical." At the same time, he described a phone call to Powell rapidly arranged by French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, during which Powell and Villepin "kind of laughed about some of the exaggerated press reporting of what 'yes' means [...] I think some of the papers have described 'yes' as 'war.'"

The US government has mainly discussed political reprisals against France designed to lessen France's political influence in international diplomacy and isolate it vis-à-vis other countries in Europe. It is considering the possibility of bypassing NATO's North Atlantic Council, in which Paris participates, and making more decisions on NATO's Defense Planning Council, which does not include France. It is also considering inviting other countries, including the traditionally more pro-American Italy and Spain, to annual Euro-American meetings that traditionally include only the US, Britain, Germany and France.

So far, US officials have shied away from commercial or economic reprisals. Attempts to target French-owned companies producing goods for the US government have foundered on objections that most such companies make these goods in the US, employing American workers. Moreover, given the shaky world economy and US dependence on foreign—in particular European—capital to maintain the US balance of payments, measures that carry the risk of provoking an all-out trade war would be highly dangerous. The conservative French daily *Le Figaro* remarked: "The White House, acting of course on commercial considerations, has discreetly torpedoed several economic sanctions plans against Paris drawn up by Congress."

The threats have not changed the right-wing French government's basic foreign policy orientation, which still remains firmly set on mending ties with Washington. Villepin issued a statement while on tour in Ankara, saying: "The 'should we have war or not' phase is over. We have to look to the future together. France wants to show its openness and pragmatism."

Powerful sections of the French ruling elite view Washington's determination to punish France despite all its concessions to US warmongering with increasing dismay and incomprehension. *Le Figaro* drew up a list of other recent French concessions to the US, besides the issue of Iraq sanctions: "[France] accepted, for the first time, that NATO intervene outside Europe by taking up the leadership of the international security force in Afghanistan.... It proposed that UN weapons inspectors work side by side with US and UK inspectors in Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction. It quieted down its denunciations of the 'illegality' of the war. So many attempts to get things moving which have obviously not been enough to appease Washington."

Government spokesman Jean-François Copé tried to downplay the importance of Powell's comments, saying that they "in no way correspond to the reality of our current relations with the United States, as one can see by the recent phone conversation between President Chirac and President Bush." However, as the center-left daily *Libération* pointed out, the word US officials used to

© World Socialist Web Site

describe the call ("businesslike") is used "in diplomatic circles to describe a glacial climate."

French ruling circles recognize the threat that Franco-American discord poses to the unity of bourgeois Europe. Guillaume Parmentier, head of the Centre Français pour les Etats-Unis (CFE—French Center for the United States), told *Le Figaro* that "if Franco-American relations stay strained, our European partners may abandon our conception of a common European foreign policy.... [France] will have to, if not completely humble herself before the US, at least cozy up to them."

Such "cozying" has not convinced the Bush administration to back down from its provocative, bullying stance. The Bush administration has announced that when it attends the June 1 G-8 economic summit of industrialized countries at Évian in the French Alps, President Bush will symbolically refuse to spend the night in France, shuttling each night to a hotel in nearby Switzerland. A French official responded, "We are not forcing anyone to spend the night in France." However, an anonymous French diplomat also noted the irony in Bush's refusal to stay in France, which granted overflight rights to US warplanes on their way to bomb Iraq, coupled with his decision to stay in Switzerland, which refused to grant the US such rights.

Although the Bush administration seems intent on giving France an exemplary punishment as a warning to others—according to *Washington Post* editorialist Jim Hoagland, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's mantra is "Punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia"—such bullying treatment is in no way reserved for France alone. In an extraordinary breach of diplomatic protocol, the Bush administration has still refused to congratulate German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on his 2002 reelection on a platform of keeping Germany out of the Iraq war.

It has also criticized Canadian Premier Jean Chrétien for his insufficient support for the US-led war. The Canadian newspaper the *Globe and Mail* noted anxiously on April 24, "Mr. Bush's administration has made no secret of how it sees the failure of Canada, France, Germany, and several other long-time close allies to join the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq."

William Safire, an editorialist for the *New York Times*, fulfilled the now-familiar function of cynical government propagandist and character assassin in an April 24 editorial on Franco-American conflicts, titled "Chirac's Latest Ploy." He gloats that "realpolitik" is preventing French corporations from winning "fat contracts" involved in the reconstruction of Iraq. He further brands the UN's involvement in Iraq as a scheme to funnel funds to "Paris, Moscow, and Damascus" and France's latest concession concerning UN sanctions as a way to "keep a heavy UN foot on Iraqi [oil] pipelines." After further attacks on France, Russia, and the UN, Safire concludes that France and the US will "be friendly again," but that "Chirac and his poodle Putin have severely damaged the United Nations."

Some of this writing is so blatantly dishonest as to virtually refute itself. Although Safire fumes at the idea that French companies might obtain "fat contracts" in Iraq, he has no problem with the US using "realpolitik"—a term initially used to designate nineteenth-century Prussia's militarist and expansionist policy—in order to block French corporations and secure these same contracts for their American rivals. Safire is willing to ascribe dishonesty and greed to the Europeans, but he never even vaguely entertains the possibility that such motivations might have anything to do with US policy.

As for France's proposals for UN inspectors to return to Iraq, they are rather commonsensical if one gives any credence to US claims concerning Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. After all, Washington's toppling of the Hussein regime triggered widespread and uncontrolled looting, during which the hypothetical weapons of mass destruction could have fallen into the hands of the increasingly powerful Shia movement, which the US government has long accused of having links to terrorist groups and to Iran, part of Bush's "axis of evil." Safire completely avoids this issue.

However, perhaps the most serious omission in Safire's remarkably evasive column is one that he shares with all of the Bush administration and its media apologists who have commented on the Franco-American conflicts: they fundamentally underestimate the unpredictable and serious consequences of US actions.

The easy assurance with which the Bush administration plans on whipping the European states into line contrasts starkly with its string of international diplomatic failures in the lead-up to the Iraq war. Its notorious diplomatic ineptitude may eventually backfire for them and cause serious political upheavals in Europe, as the European working masses view their cowardly, pro-American rulers with increasing contempt.

Nor should anyone underestimate the significance of the increasingly virulent and militaristic US campaign against France. Safire's editorial lists Paris and Moscow in the same breath as Damascus, which is widely rumored to be next on Washington's Middle East hit list. The day Baghdad fell, the conservative *New York Post* ran an editorial titled "On to Paris!"—the marching cry of the German armies during the first days of World War One.

The US media have served an important function in recent years: justifying US wars seeking to build a modicum of popular support for military aggression by demonizing poorly understood foreign enemies. For the first time in recent history, this process—which largely relies on the most deranged and backward elements of the US ruling elite—has been turned, not on a relatively defenseless Third World country, but on another major capitalist power.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site