

Friedman of the Times declares war on France

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An atmosphere of disarray pervades the Bush administration as it confronts a debacle in Iraq. US troops are confronting daily and increasingly deadly attacks that Pentagon officials have acknowledged are the work of ordinary Iraqis determined to free their country of foreign military occupation. The costs of the venture are spiraling out of control, with massive public opposition to Bush's call for another \$87 billion to finance US military efforts.

Meanwhile, the lies that were used to promote the illegal war—the supposed threat of weapons of mass destruction and an alleged connection between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda—are coming unraveled. Not a trace has been found of the massive quantities of chemical and biological weapons that the US claimed existed in Iraq.

This week Bush admitted that the administration “had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with September 11th,” despite the relentless propaganda to convince the American people of just the opposite in the run-up to the war, and statements by Vice President Cheney just days earlier suggesting that there existed just such a link.

All of the predictions made by the US administration—that US troops would be welcomed as liberators; that Iraqi oil would pay for reconstruction while producing a bonanza for US firms; and that the rest of the world would be convinced by a successful US war to solidarize themselves with Washington—have proven uniformly false.

It is clear that the occupation of Iraq is turning into a military, economic and political catastrophe that will end only with the unconditional withdrawal of all US forces.

For those who were most convinced that US military might would suffice in imposing Washington's will upon the Middle East—the administration's journalistic toadies—the crisis in Iraq has created extreme frustration and belligerence.

Such is the case with Thomas Friedman, the chief foreign affairs columnist of the *New York Times*. Those familiar with his writings will hardly be surprised that his latest piece consists of smug lies in service of a bellicose US foreign policy. That is his specialty. The title of his column, “Our War with France” does merit attention, however.

Friedman is a thug with a laptop. He has used his column to advocate the “pulverizing” of Belgrade, the smashing of Iraq and has proudly advanced the slogan “give war a chance.” Now, it would seem, he is pushing for the sacking of Paris. Having supported a war against a relatively defenseless Iraq, Friedman now uses the language of aggression against a major European power and erstwhile US ally.

The catastrophe in Iraq, according to Friedman, is the fault of the French. This is the case because, having opposed the US war, the French government has had the temerity of seeing its warnings about the calamity it would produce richly confirmed.

Not only that, Paris has balked at US demands that it and other countries fork over tens of billions of dollars and tens of thousands of troops, no questions asked, to bolster a US-run exercise in neocolonialism.

“If you watch how France is behaving today ... then there is only one conclusion one can draw: France wants America to fail in Iraq,” Friedman writes. “France wants America to sink in a quagmire there in the crazy hope that a weakened US will pave the way for France to assume its ‘rightful’ place as America's equal...”

In reality, Washington has needed no one's help in sinking into a quagmire of its own making in Iraq. France has from the outset attempted to restrain the US and warn it of the consequences of waging unprovoked wars of aggression in the Middle East. It has assumed the role of an older and wiser imperialist power, with knowledge gained from painful experience, including its failed attempt to suppress the Algerian independence movement four decades ago.

No doubt, the French government has acted to defend its not inconsiderable financial interests in Iraq and throughout the region. This necessarily means resisting the attempt by Washington to establish unrestricted control over the oil upon which France and the rest of Europe depend.

Not only does Friedman blame France for the failure of the US occupation, but for the war itself. Paris insisted, he claims, on “making it impossible for the Security Council to put a real ultimatum to Saddam Hussein that might have avoided a war.”

It is one thing to lie; it is another to think that no one will remember the lies you wrote before. The Bush administration never had any intention of avoiding a war with Iraq. On the contrary, everything it did—from fabricating evidence about weapons of mass destruction, to the false claims concerning September 11 and the maneuvers within the UN itself—were aimed at implementing a plan for war that was worked out well before Bush even entered the White House.

What about Friedman? One would imagine from his latest column that he spent the months preceding the US invasion longing for a peaceful solution to the Iraq question and was dismayed that the French forced Washington into a war.

It is worthwhile reviewing some of his pacifist essays for the *New York Times* in the run-up to the US invasion. Last December 1, he drafted a column advising the Pentagon that the best way to prepare a war against Iraq was to kidnap Iraqi scientists and force them to say that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons.

On January 5 he provocatively headlined his column “A War for Oil?” Replying to his own question, he wrote: “My short answer is yes. Any war we launch in Iraq will certainly be—in part—about oil. To

deny that is laughable.”

On June 4, he dismissed the growing body of evidence that Bush lied about weapons of mass destruction. “The real reason for this war,” Friedman wrote, “which was never stated, was that after 9/11 America needed to hit someone in the Arab-Muslim world. Afghanistan wasn’t enough.” He continued, “Smashing Saudi Arabia or Syria would have been fine. But we hit Saddam for one simple reason: *because we could.*”

This last statement aptly sums up the gangster mentality that reigns within the Bush White House. The retroactive claim that if only the French had backed an open-ended resolution legitimizing a US invasion, war could have been avoided is ludicrous.

In an attempt to preserve a veneer of objectivity, Friedman includes a word of criticism for the Bush administration. He accuses Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld of having been “full of themselves” after the US conquest of Iraq and, as a result, missing an opportunity “to magnanimously reach out to Paris to join in reconstruction.” He quickly adds, however, “it might have softened French attitudes. But even that I have doubts about.”

Who is he kidding? Far from magnanimity, the Bush administration was—and still is—speaking openly of “punishing” France for daring to defy the US in the UN Security Council. It is determined to keep the French out of the reconstruction in order to preclude any competition for control over Iraq’s oilfields.

What has riled Washington—and Friedman—about France’s current position is its demand that the US cede significant political power to the UN and an elected Iraqi government. The Bush administration’s has no intention of doing either, because it has yet to complete its objectives: securing control over the country’s oil wealth and forging a puppet regime that will guarantee the US military bases and overriding control.

Another Friedman specialty is dressing up this predatory agenda as an exercise in democracy. He does not disappoint in his latest column, this time accusing the French of lacking the noble aspirations that supposedly animate Washington.

“France has never been interested in promoting democracy in the modern Arab world,” Friedman writes. Unlike the US, of course, whose closest Arab ally is the absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia and which finances and supports the Israeli state in a campaign of violent repression and assassination that has abrogated the fundamental democratic rights of some 3.5 million Palestinians in the occupied territories. Washington’s latest blow for democratic principles in the Middle East was vetoing a UN resolution urging Israel not to murder Yasser Arafat, the elected president of the Palestinian Authority.

Friedman continues: “It is stunning to me that the EU, misled by France, could let itself be written out of the most important political development project in modern Middle Eastern history.”

The most important “political development project,” he might have added, since the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement dividing the Arab world into French and British colonial spheres. But this time the Americans have yet to secure control and the French are offered nothing. Yet they are asked to supply young European soldiers to put themselves on the receiving end of the bullets and bombs now aimed at young American ones. That and several tens of billions of dollars.

Finally, Friedman accuses the French of failing to recognize their own self interest, warning that a victory of the Iraqi resistance over the US occupation will “energize” radical Islamist forces within France, which as a result will see “its own social fabric affected.”

No doubt the French government has real concerns about

antagonizing its considerable Arab and Muslim population. It is well aware from its own bloody colonial past, however, that sending more troops to fight a guerrilla resistance will result only in more resistance and a spiral of violence that will threaten stability throughout the region and in Europe itself. It also knows that the US war in Iraq has provoked an unprecedented rise in popular hatred of Washington, not only in the Middle East but around the globe.

Friedman speaks for the most cynical and reactionary layers within the government and the US ruling elite. His lies and journalistic thuggery may have served a certain purpose in creating a climate for launching the war against Iraq, but they are far less useful in papering over the desperate crisis that the war has provoked.

In the beginning of the column he accuses France of wanting “America to fail in Iraq.” This is no doubt true at least in one sense. French interests are in conflict with the US drive for hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Whether it will be able to reach an accommodation in the short term remains to be seen.

Any attempt to bail out and thereby prolong the Bush administration’s criminal enterprise in Iraq with UN-sanctioned money or troops should be resolutely opposed. For “America to fail in Iraq”—that is, an end to an illegal occupation that continues to claim the lives of both Iraqis and Americans, and the unconditional the withdrawal of all US troops—is in the interests of the vast majority of Americans themselves.

Bush’s policy of “preemptive war”—of utilizing America’s military might to seize resources, topple governments and conquer peoples—must fail and be completely discredited in the eyes of the American people and the world. A “success” in this predatory policy would only create the conditions for more wars—including against France, Russia, China or another power. It would also produce deeper attacks on democratic rights and social conditions within the US itself.

It is imperative that those responsible for the war on Iraq, and for the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of Americans, be held accountable through investigations, impeachment proceedings and criminal prosecution. This includes the well-paid hacks like Friedman who deliberately lied to the American people to promote this war.



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