

Washington weighed military seizure of Arab oilfields in 1973

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The US government drew up plans for the military seizure of oilfields in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states in 1973, according to top-secret documents declassified by the British government on January 1.

The documents further reveal that during this same period, the administration of Richard Nixon placed all US military forces on the highest state of alert, with little justification and no notice to US allies. They indicate that the British government believed Nixon had brought the world to the brink of nuclear war as a means of reversing his government's crisis over the Watergate scandal.

The threats of a US invasion and world war arose in the aftermath of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent imposition of an oil embargo by Arab states—an action that caused oil prices to soar in the US and the rest of the industrialized world.

They also occurred at the height of the Watergate crisis. October 1973 was the month of the “Saturday Night Massacre,” when Nixon asserted unrestrained executive power, firing the Watergate special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, as well as Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his deputy, in an attempt to squelch the investigation into White House crimes. The same month saw the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew over a corruption scandal.

The warning of a possible military intervention in the Persian Gulf came from then-US Defense Secretary James Schlesinger to Britain's ambassador to Washington, Lord Cromer. According to Cromer's report to the British government, Schlesinger told him that one “outcome of the Middle East crisis was the [sight] of industrialized nations being continuously submitted to whims of under-populated, under-developed countries.” Schlesinger added that “it was no longer obvious to him that the US could not use force,” Cromer reported.

The British ambassador concluded from the remarks that “it might not ... be possible to rule out a more direct application of military force” by the US.

Cromer's report provided a glimpse of the sharp tensions that existed between what ostensibly were—then as now—the

closest Western allies. The British ambassador commented in his cable to London: “Couthness is not Schlesinger's strong point. One or two of his remarks bordered on the offensive.”

London's main concern, however, was not the US defense secretary's lack of decorum, but the prospect of Washington asserting unilateral control over Middle East oil reserves, potentially provoking a world war in the process.

The Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Edward Heath ordered the country's intelligence agencies to draw up contingency plans to prepare for US military action in the Persian Gulf. The result was another of the documents released on New Year's Day: a top secret memorandum entitled “Middle East: Possible Use of Force by the United States.”

Dated December 13, 1973, and prepared by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee, the document predicted US military intervention in the event of either a breakdown of a tenuous ceasefire between the Arab states and Israel or a continuation of the Arab oil embargo. “The US government might consider that it could not tolerate a situation in which the US and its allies were in effect at the mercy of a small group of unreasonable countries,” it stated.

British intelligence warned that Washington's preparations for an intervention aimed at seizing Persian Gulf oil “has been reflected, we believe, in their contingency planning.”

The 22-page document went on to provide specific projections about what was seen as impending US military aggression. “We believe the American preference would be a rapid operation conducted by themselves to seize oilfields,” the document stated. It predicted that the US military would need just three brigades—up to 15,000 troops—to occupy oil-producing regions in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi.

While the document said that Washington might ask Britain for assistance—particularly in Abu Dhabi, where British military forces were deployed—it predicted that as a result of such unilateral military operation “deep US-

European rifts could ensue.”

The intelligence memorandum warned the British government that the prospect of a US-Soviet confrontation ensuing from the seizure of Persian Gulf oilfields could not be ruled out. Moscow could airlift troops into the area to aid threatened Arab states, it said.

“The greatest risk of such confrontation in the Gulf would probably arise in Kuwait where the Iraqis, with Soviet backing, might be tempted to intervene,” the intelligence memorandum added.

In the end, the Arab-Israeli ceasefire held and the oil embargo was lifted in March 1974.

Another document from the same period revealed the rage of Heath and the British government over Nixon’s order for the US military to implement a “stage-three alert” in October 1973, effectively putting Washington’s nuclear missile force on a hair trigger.

The action, which brought the world closer to the nuclear abyss than at any time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, was not justified by any Soviet actions, the British prime minister concluded. He chafed at having to learn from press reports that the US had gone on a nuclear war footing.

The order was ostensibly in response to Soviet fleet maneuvers in the Mediterranean. “Personally,” Heath told his secretary, “I fail to see how any initiative, threatened or real, by the Soviet leadership required such a worldwide nuclear alert. We have to face the fact that the American action has done immense harm, I believe, both in this country and worldwide.”

British intelligence chiefs concurred with the prime minister’s assessment, declaring in a memorandum that “we are inclined to see the US response as higher than necessary to achieve the desired effect.”

Heath went further, suggesting that Nixon’s real motive for threatening nuclear war was to divert public attention from the deepening political crisis facing his government at home. “An American president in the Watergate position apparently prepared to go to such lengths at a moment’s notice without consultation with his allies,” the British prime minister wrote.

The release of the British documents was mandated under a law that requires the National Archive in London to make certain types of previously classified material public after 30 years. Despite this passage of time, the contents of these documents have immense relevance to the current policies of the US government.

Three decades after these secret memoranda were drafted, the US has done just what British intelligence then warned against: invaded the Persian Gulf and seized control of Iraq’s oilfields, which hold the second-largest petroleum reserves on the planet.

While the Bush administration and its apologists have insisted that the war against Iraq was about weapons of mass destruction, terrorist links, the democratization of the Middle East—in short, anything but oil—the 30-year-old documents make it clear that oil was—and remains—the central preoccupation and motivating factor in Washington’s policy in the region.

What has changed in the interim is, above all, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the absence of any threat of a significant military response to US aggression. In 1973, US imperialism felt constrained in the utilization of military force to achieve its global aims by the existence of the Soviet military. Today, the most powerful sections of the US ruling class feel no such constraint. On the contrary, they are driven by the specter of mounting threats to US economic and political dominance from Europe and Asia to exploit America’s present military supremacy all the more ruthlessly and recklessly.

The principal architects of the US war—Vice President Richard Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—began their political careers as officials in the Nixon administration. They were among the most prominent figures within the right-wing milieu in the 1990s that urged Washington to capitalize on its unrivaled military power in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse to assert its hegemony over the planet’s strategic regions and resources.

The installation of the Bush administration in 2000 placed them in positions of power, and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks provided them with the pretext for implementing these long-standing plans.

There is another aspect of the 1973 British documents that sheds light on the present political conjuncture in the US. If Richard Nixon was prepared to risk a nuclear conflagration 30 years ago in a bid to rescue his administration from internal crisis, to what extremes are his political heirs in the Bush administration prepared to go to prevent their removal from office?

Under conditions of upcoming national elections, the refusal of the government to give an accounting to the American people of the circumstances surrounding the 9/11 attacks, and continuous security alerts and warnings of another major terrorist attack on US soil, this question bears careful consideration.



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