



# Stop the War Before It Starts

By David Cortright

**T**he Bush Administration once again is gearing up for war against Iraq. It's a war that could cause a massive loss of life and could end with the use of nuclear weapons by the United States or Israel. It's a war that is unnecessary, a war we—as progressives, as peace activists—have an obligation to oppose with all nonviolent means at our disposal.

The attack-Iraq lobby argues that the military overthrow of Saddam Hussein is a necessary part of the war on terrorism. Saddam is indeed a bru-

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tal tyrant and a perpetrator of terrorism against his own people and neighboring countries, but there is no solid evidence that he supported the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11. Bush has emphasized the danger of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction as a justification for deposing Saddam. Iraq's weapons programs are certainly a threat to security, but there are more effective ways of containing this danger. U.S. officials would like nothing less than the installation of a pro-American government that will do Washington's bidding and open the country's oil wealth to Western companies. For these purposes, the White House believes that the war option remains a necessity.

The preparations for battle are already under way. Senior U.S. commanders have moved to the Persian

Gulf region and have brought with them 1,000 war planners and logistical support specialists. General Tommy Franks, the head of Central Command, has developed options for deploying heavy tanks and mechanized infantry divisions. Armored vehicles are already pre-positioned in the region. The Air Force is transferring some of its operations from Prince Sultan Air Base, where Saudi officials may refuse permission for bombing raids against Iraq, to the al-Udeid base in Qatar, where American pilots will be able to operate freely. The Defense Intelligence Agency has produced a classified report that identifies a long list of potential targets for air attack. British officials have ordered their commanders to begin preparations for possible operations in Iraq. The stage is being set for what could be a large-scale and bloody conflict.

Kenneth M. Pollack, former Iraq

specialist on the National Security Council, argued in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the military overthrow of Saddam Hussein would require a major ground invasion by 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. troops. Air power alone would not be sufficient. There is no equivalent in Iraq of the Northern Alliance, which shouldered most of the burden of fighting in Afghanistan. Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and Shi'ite groups in the south fought against the Baghdad regime after the Gulf War but were betrayed by Bush's father. They are no match for Hussein's army of perhaps 400,000 troops. Although weakened by more than a decade of sanctions, the Baghdad government retains a large military apparatus. Removing the present regime and installing a pro-American government will require the invasion and occupation of Iraq by a substantial number of U.S. ground forces.

The onset of war, if it comes, will likely occur in the first half of 2003. Considerable time will be required for the transport and deployment of military forces to the region. Arms manufacturers will need additional months to replenish the precision weapons expended in Afghanistan and to stockpile inventories. Political factors will also complicate the Administration's timeline. The conflict between Israel and Palestine poses a dilemma for the war planners. A military attack on Iraq would be unthinkable while the blood continues to flow in Palestine and Israel. The Bush Administration's interest in quieting the conflict in Palestine is motivated, in part, by a desire to clear the way for military actions against Iraq.

The U.S. electoral calendar will also be a factor. The Administration does not want to begin a major ground war with uncertain outcome before the midterm elections, where control of the Senate is at stake. Military preparations might be under way by then (to rally the flag for Republican candidates and trump Democratic criticisms of the Administration's

domestic policy), but the actual start of hostilities would likely come after the November vote. Similar considerations suggest that the Administration would want the war to be completed before the 2004 Presidential elections. Political and logistical considerations thus point to the possible start of hostilities in 2003.

Another complication in the war scenario is the fate of U.N. weapons inspections. If the goal is eradicating Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, as President Bush insists, the surest means to that end is not war but the resumption of intrusive inspections. The destruction of Iraq's Scud missiles and most of its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons during the 1990s resulted not from U.S. military attacks but from U.N. weapons inspections. The return of inspectors could neutralize whatever remains of Iraq's weapons programs. The U.N. Special Commission, UNSCOM, achieved considerable success in dismantling Iraq's weapons during the 1990s, although it ran into relentless resistance from the Baghdad government and was forced to leave the country in December 1998, just ahead of U.S. and British bombing raids. The successor agency, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission, UNMOVIC, is ready to return inspectors to Iraq and could complete the disarmament mandate if the Baghdad government is willing to cooperate.

Saddam Hussein recently reopened the weapons inspection question in response to U.S. war threats. Three rounds of talks have been held with Secretary General Kofi Annan on the possible resumption of the U.N. disarmament mission. Iraq has linked the return of inspectors to an end to U.S. military threats and the lifting of economic sanctions. Washington has refused to consider a lifting of sanctions, however, even though the 1991 Gulf War cease-fire resolution, which the United States helped to write, specifies that sanc-

tions will be lifted when the disarmament mandate is completed. The promise to lift sanctions in return for compliance with weapons inspections would be a powerful inducement for Iraqi cooperation. It could help to resolve the dispute over weapons and end the prolonged sanctions-related suffering of the Iraqi people.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others are openly dismissive of U.N. weapons inspections. Rumsfeld claims that inspections could never be intrusive enough to satisfy concerns about Iraq's weapons programs. "I can't quite picture how intrusive something would have to be," said Rumsfeld at an April press conference. He and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz fear that a drawn-out diplomatic tangle over the terms of inspection could impede the preferred use of force.

The debate about weapons inspections will be crucial to the prospects for war. The United States might attempt to take advantage of the inspections issue to build support for military action. If Baghdad refuses to permit inspections, or if it places new obstacles in their way, Washington might provoke a crisis by issuing an ultimatum. Iraq's refusal to comply with such an ultimatum could then become the pretext for war.

**T**here are many reasons for opposing military action in Iraq. The first and most obvious is the lack of a justification for war. Iraq has not attacked or credibly threatened the United States. Its weapons programs, while a serious concern, do not pose an immediate threat to neighboring countries or the United States. Under international law, one country is justified in attacking another only when it is under attack or about to be under attack. There is no *casus belli* here.

A second reason is the potential human cost of war. Saddam has demonstrated his willingness in the past to permit appalling losses of life

in the pursuit of his military and political ambitions. If he is pushed against the wall in a final showdown with the United States, he will bring many Iraqis and Americans down with him. More than 100,000 Iraqis could die in such a conflict, and casualties among U.S. forces might be significant, as well.

Third, war in Iraq could lead to the very use of weapons of mass destruction that the Bush Administration says it wants to prevent. U.S. claims about Iraqi weapons are greatly exaggerated, but it is likely that Baghdad retains some chemical and biological weapons capability. Saddam Hussein showed his willingness to use chemical weapons against Kurdish villages and Iranian troops in the 1980s, while he was a U.S. ally. If faced with military defeat, Saddam might launch an attack against the only targets he is capable of hitting—Israel or the assembled U.S. forces in the region. If Iraq were to kill hundreds of Israelis, the Sharon government might respond in kind, perhaps even using nuclear weapons. The Pentagon's new doctrine, as articulated in the *Nuclear Posture Review*, envisions the use of nuclear weapons for precisely such purposes—to counter the development or use of weapons of mass destruction by supposed rogue regimes in the developing world. If large numbers of U.S. troops were killed in an Iraqi chemical weapons attack, the pressure for a nuclear response would be great.

A fourth concern is the political damage that would result from war. The United States would be acting almost entirely alone, and in the face of strong opposition from many nations, especially in the Arab world. The political rage sparked by an American war could destabilize governments in the region and increase turmoil and political extremism throughout the Middle East and beyond. It would exacerbate anti-American hatred and produce new recruits for suicide bombings against the United States or Israel.

A unilateral war would also undermine the political cooperation needed for the international campaign to isolate and de-fund Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks. The success of this campaign against terrorism depends on cooperation among police officials, central bankers, and customs officers in many countries, especially in the Middle East. This cooperation would be jeopardized by unilateral U.S. action in Iraq. The United States might win the battle against Iraq but lose the war against terrorism.

A U.S. military campaign against Iraq would set a dangerous precedent of preemptive attack that violates the charter of the United Nations and undermines the very foundations of international law. U.S. and British officials speak openly of preemption as a necessary response to the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. President Bush told West Point graduates in June that "our security will require . . . preemptive action when necessary." A senior British official recently told a London seminar that the Western democracies can no longer afford to rely on deterrence. They will not wait to be attacked before responding, but will strike first to eliminate perceived dangers before they arise.

This is the doctrine of imperial arrogance. It is a philosophy little different from that of aggressors throughout history. It is a formula for endless war and military mobilization. Already the Pentagon budget has jumped to nearly \$400 billion a year, and it will rise even further if the cycle of war and vengeance spins out of control.

**B**ecause the dangers of attacking Iraq are so grave, it may still be possible to prevent this war. There are sharp differences of opinion in Washington about whether and how to proceed with military action. Conservatives as well as liberals fret over the costs and uncertainties of war. Senior military comman-

ders are nervous about the possible use of chemical weapons and the prospects of a prolonged military occupation. Some officials are concerned about over-reach and question whether the United States can meet continuing military commitments around the world, including in Afghanistan, while mounting a major new operation against Iraq.

Members of the Senate are likely to demand a formal debate on military action in Iraq as their constitutional prerogative. In the current political climate, with Bush enjoying 70 percent approval ratings, most Senators would probably go along with the President if he decides to use force. A Congressional debate would nonetheless place an obstacle in the way of the Administration's march toward war, and it could provide a focal point for mobilizing popular opposition.

Opinion polls show considerable public skepticism about invading Iraq, despite strong support for the war in Afghanistan. An April poll by NBC and *The Wall Street Journal* found 88 percent approval for the military action in Afghanistan, but more limited support for possible war against Iraq. When asked if the United States "should take military action against Iraq," 57 percent said "should," while 28 percent said "should not," with 8 percent saying "it depends," and 7 percent undecided. A CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll conducted in March found support for air strikes against Iraq but opposition to the use of U.S. ground troops. When respondents were asked if they favored using ground troops to invade Iraq, 50 percent said no, while 46 percent said yes. Though this opposition to the use of ground troops fell to 34 percent in a June Gallup Poll, it is still significant. It means that the movement to oppose the war in Iraq begins with an important base of potential support.

As the prospect of a U.S. ground invasion becomes more apparent, public skepticism will only increase.

In order to build and solidify anti-war opposition, it is imperative that peace and justice activists mount an effective campaign of public education and action. We must sound the alarm about the imminent threat of war, highlight the costs and consequences of military action, and propose viable policy alternatives. We need to win the support of many of those who favored the war in Afghanistan, as Michael T. Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College, noted at a Tufts University conference back in December. This means focusing on the dangers of war in Iraq rather than dwelling on U.S. misdeeds in the past. We should frame the anti-war message in ways that appeal to mainstream audiences. We can do this by emphasizing widely shared values and themes, such as protecting the innocent, winning the campaign against terrorism, cooperating with allies, and preventing the rise of anti-American-

ism. We should strive to ride the patriotic wave and offer forward-looking solutions that uphold the best traditions of American democracy.

It is also important to provide constructive alternatives to war. We can't simply ignore the Iraqi weapons threat or dismiss the menace that Saddam Hussein poses to his people and his neighbors. But we can argue that there are better ways of addressing these concerns. The United States should work through the U.N. Security Council to return weapons inspectors to Iraq. This will require diplomatic flexibility and a willingness to offer the lifting of all remaining civilian sanctions if Baghdad accepts and cooperates with U.N. inspections. The United States should also work with other nations, including Russia and Iraq's neighbors, to enforce an effective arms embargo after civilian sanctions are lifted. This would be a step toward "establishing in the Middle East a zone free from

weapons of mass destruction," as specified in the original Gulf War cease-fire agreement. These are viable policy options that could address the Iraqi weapons threat without resorting to war and with the full support of the United Nations.

To convey our anti-war message we must take action. Arrange delegation meetings with members of Congress. Organize demonstrations and vigils. Activate the religious community. Organize teach-ins on college campuses and in communities. Raise the issue at candidate forums. Introduce resolutions in professional associations. Write letters to the editor and appear on radio and television talk shows. Where funds are available, conduct advertising and public relations campaigns. We must use every means of citizen action at our disposal to build a chorus of opposition to the madness of war in Iraq. It is not yet too late to stop this war before it begins. ♦



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