

'October Surprise' Attacks To Hit Iraq

by Edward Spannaus

Although there is much talk about a new "October Surprise" in the form of another round of U.S.-British air strikes against Iraq, there should be no "surprise" if this happens. In recent weeks, there has been a steady drumbeat in the U.S. and British news media for renewed military attacks on Iraq under one pretext or another.

The latest round of battle-cries against Iraq was signalled by an Aug. 22 *New York Times* lead story, entitled "UN Readies Team To Check Weapons Held by Iraqis: Confrontation Is Likely." The thrust of the article was that a new team of United Nations weapons inspectors, representing 19 nations and responsible to UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, was ready to be deployed to Baghdad. But the question was, what would the United States do, should the Iraqi government refuse to allow the team into the country. The article quoted an unnamed U.S. government official, who refused to rule out the possibility of an "October Surprise" of U.S. military action at the height of the U.S. Presidential campaign. "They [the Iraqis] will be making a severe mistake if they think an election campaign will affect how we carry out our foreign policy," the official said.

Shortly thereafter, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz announced that Iraq indeed would not allow the new team into the country, because Iraq does not recognize UN Resolution 1284, which chartered the new inspection team. Hans Blix, the Swedish diplomat selected by the UN Security Council to head the new inspection team, was advised by the United States and UN Security Council members to hold off filing his report while the UN Millennium Summit was under way.

During U.S. Senate hearings on Iraq policy held on Sept. 19, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Edward Walker declared that the situation is now at an "impasse." Walker said that Blix has now filed his report, but that Blix is not prepared to go to Iraq without Iraqi acceptance of Resolution 1284.

However, there are plenty of other pretexts that can be utilized. In that same hearing, Undersecretary of Defense Walter Slocombe described three "red lines" which could trigger military action: if Iraq reconstitutes its weapons of mass destruction program; threatens its neighbors, or U.S. or British forces; or moves against the Kurds.

The Drumbeat Continues

During the first week of September, CNN reported that the United States is ready "for at least three days of intense

strikes" against Iraq in the event that Baghdad fires missiles at Israel. This followed reports that a Patriot air defense battery had been put on heightened alert at a U.S. base in Germany, ready to be deployed to Israel in case of any threat to Israel from Iraq.

On Sept. 14, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright threatened to bomb Iraq if it attacked its neighbors. "We have a credible force in the region and are prepared to use it in an appropriate way at the time of our choosing," Albright told a UN press conference.

Albright made her latest threat, after Iraq accused Kuwait of drilling oil in Iraqi territory, in precisely the same manner that Kuwait had done in 1990, which provoked the 1990-91 war. Iraq has accused Kuwait of stealing at least 300,000 barrels of Iraqi oil per day, taken from oil fields in the border area by means of horizontal drilling. And just before Albright's statement, the State Department had accused Iraqi planes of conducting incursions into Saudi Arabian airspace.

Reuters recently ran a story on the rising possibility of a military clash between the United States and Iraq, citing the pattern of recent incidents and what it calls provocative actions by Saddam Hussein. "The West has been holding back so far, but if this pattern of provocation continues, I'd be very surprised if we get through the next few weeks without some military action," an unnamed "senior Western diplomat" said. Albright is reported to have discussed this with British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook at the UN General Assembly in New York.

On Sept. 18, the *New York Post* ran a lead editorial accusing President Clinton of "appeasement" of Saddam. Clinton doesn't want a flare-up as he leaves office, said the *Post*, so Saddam will take advantage of Clinton's weakness. "Pundits have been busy guessing what kind of 'October Surprise' the Clintonites might be planning," the editorial said. "The most deadly surprise, though, might not come from Clinton, but Saddam."

War with Russia?

One of the most dramatic warnings was run by the right-wing website Newsmax.com, which ran an article charging that Clinton might attack Iraq "to help Gore win the election," but that this could set off a war with Russia, which could escalate to a nuclear war. Newsmax cited two recent events: U.S. saber-rattling over Iraq and the beefing up of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, and Russia's announcement that it intends to resume regular commercial flights to Baghdad, despite the UN air embargo.

What worries many observers, the article said, is what happens if a U.S. bombing raid on Baghdad were to hit Russian planes and kill Russian passengers. This could set off an explosive confrontation with Russia, which could quickly escalate into war. And, "given the deplorable state of Russia's conventional forces there is little doubt it would resort to using its huge nuclear arsenal, which the Kremlin regards as its first line of defense."