

Washington Is Heading For a New Iraq War

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

Two weeks after President George Bush's infamous reference to an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address signalled an ugly turn in administration policy, the United States government seems now fully committed to a major military operation against Iraq.

A multitude of reports and signals, including statements by Secretary of State Colin Powell and other administration officials, indicate that the basic decision—ignoring strong objections from Europe, Russia, and many other countries—has already been made to use military force to eliminate the regime of Saddam Hussein. Reportedly, the only questions remaining are the "how" and "when" of the operation.

For sure, the decision to go for a new military adventure has nothing to do with anything in Iraq. The U.S. Administration's "flight into war" reflects absolute panic at the unprecedented new wave of financial defaults and mega-bankruptcies, which has hit the United States and international financial system since the beginning of the year.

Powell declared on Feb. 7 that the U.S. government is committed to a "regime change" in Iraq, and that the United States is prepared, if necessary, to "do it alone." Even an Iraqi agreement with the United Nations concerning a resumption of weapons inspections, would not change the administration's attitude, he indicated. In other words, the United States is prepared to simply create a pretext, if it needs one.

At the same time, Powell made it clear that the Bush Administration and the President himself are fully committed to the "axis of evil" concept, despite massive protests from around the world. "The President means what he said," Powell told an audience of top U.S. State Department officials. "He feels deeply about it, and I don't want anyone in this room to take the edge off it." Coming from the man formerly regarded as the leading "moderate" in the administration, Powell's statement (as well as repeated pronouncements by Bush) put an end to wishful attempts on many sides, to interpret Bush's ominous utterances as merely "emotional" or intended just for internal U.S. consumption.

Meanwhile, the opposition in European nations to this new insanity coming out of Washington is unprecedented in sharpness. Also, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned, with clear reference to the Europeans as well as Russia's own position, that a unilateral U.S. military action

against Iraq would spell the end of the "anti-terror coalition" that was formed after Sept. 11. Whether all these protests and warnings will be enough to stop a new war, however, remains uncertain.

The Countdown to Disaster

U.S. preparations for a military operation against Iraq include the following:

- After Sept. 11, hundreds of U.S. combat aircraft were sent to bases in the Persian Gulf and Turkey. Although the air war in Afghanistan, in which these aircraft were barely used, is now winding down, the aircraft are being kept in the vicinity of Iraq.

- The secondary command centers for the main branches of the U.S. Armed Services within the U.S. military's Central Command, have been transferred to the Persian Gulf area: the U.S. Army, in Kuwait (whence a possible ground assault might be launched); the U.S. Air Force, in Saudi Arabia; the Navy and Marines, in Bahrain.

- Intensive efforts are under way to prepare Turkey to be the new "front-line state" in "the war against terrorism" now aimed at Iraq. This includes the rather open channelling of money into the country. Following talks in Washington between President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit on Feb. 4, Turkey was granted \$9 billion by the International Monetary Fund. (Total IMF credits to Turkey now amount to \$31 billion.)

Meanwhile, U.S. Special Forces have been deployed to Turkey, and three joint U.S.-Israeli-Turkish military maneuvers are scheduled to be held in the coming weeks, centered on the Turkish air base at Konya.

- There are ongoing efforts to recruit the Kurds—who constitute the dominant population group in northern Iraq, as well as in the adjoining region of Turkey—as cannon fodder for a new war against Iraq. Indeed, the Kurds represent the only significant mass force inside Iraq which could potentially be mobilized against Saddam.

On Feb. 14, a representative in Russia of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan told the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, that a U.S. State Department delegation had already visited northern Iraq, proposing to Kurdish leaders a plan for the creation of an independent Kurdish state in exchange for support of the "anti-terror war." The German financial daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on Feb. 8 that the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which had been conducting guerrilla warfare inside Turkey against the Turkish government, is being "retooled" for deployment exclusively against Iraq. In addition, there is talk of training Iraqi Shi'ite "freedom fighters" on bases in Kuwait.

- In March, Vice-President Dick Cheney will visit eight Middle Eastern Arab countries, Israel (but not the Palestinian Territories), and Britain. The planned operation against Iraq is evidently the main subject of Cheney's deployment.



Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, whose country would be caught in the center of any war on Iraq, is making urgent bilateral efforts to prevent one, including convoking the extraordinary European Union-Organization of Islamic Conference meetings. Turkey is being offered “incentives” to support a war.

What Will Russia Do?

Despite its economic weakness, Russia remains a strategic power with considerable influence throughout the region, and close relations with Iraq itself. Thus, Russia cannot be ignored. The Bush Administration, accordingly, is making a major, coordinated attempt to buy off Russian opposition to a U.S. war against Iraq, by offering Moscow strategic concessions in arms negotiations, and in Central Asia, as well as economic and financial assistance of various sorts. In first two weeks of February:

- The United States unexpectedly reversed its hard-line position on ongoing nuclear disarmament negotiations with Russia, suddenly agreeing to Russia’s demand for a legally binding agreement.
- U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage signed an agreement with Russia on anti-terror cooperation, which included a clause to the effect that the U.S. does not intend to establish permanent military bases in Central Asia.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, during his recent visit to New York and Washington, was given strong promises of support for Russia’s membership in the World Trade Organization; of large-scale U.S. investment; and perhaps even of major U.S. purchases of Russian oil in connection with a possible new deal on the Soviet-era debt.

The U.S. Administration is not only making no secret of trying to buy off Russia on the Iraq question, but is making its offers in a completely open and arrogant way, as typified by an interview in the Russian news service strana.ru by Brookings Institute “Russia specialist” Clifford Gaddy (a for-

mer LaRouche associate who has evidently sold out himself). Gaddy said: “Whether the Russians like it or not, the probability of an American use of force against Iraq is very high today. . . . I am convinced that Russia has no ideological motives for supporting Baghdad. Moscow, in my view, is only worried about possible financial losses to the Russian economy in case of an American military operation against Iraq. . . . [So] the Kremlin should openly tell President Bush, how Washington might compensate possible financial losses to Moscow.”

The Russian elite, however, is not unaware of the danger of compromising with Bush’s insane policy. In a Feb. 8 commentary, the well-known Russian economist and political analyst Stanislav Menshikov, referred to the famous saying “Beware gift-bringing Danaans,” explaining: “In Homer’s *Iliad* the Danaans were synonymous with

Greeks. They duped the Trojans into accepting as a token of friendship a giant and richly decorated wooden horse” with Greek soliders hiding inside. “Something similar happened on Mikhail Kasyanov’s recent visit to Washington. Why such a mood for compromise on the part of the Bush Administration at this particular point in time? If one recalls the recent State of the Union address and its accent on the ‘axis of evil,’ then putting two and two together is not a problem. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are countries, with whom Russia maintains close economic and other ties.”

The response of Russian President Putin remains, as so often, ambiguous. Striking, is the fact that Putin was quiet for nearly two weeks after Bush’s “axis of evil” formulation, making his first significant foreign policy statement in a Feb. 11 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. While Bush’s statement had been greeted with shock and outrage in many Russian circles, and seen as a betrayal of the post-Sept. 11 Bush-Putin partnership, Putin refrained from any substantial criticism. At the same time, however, he insisted on Russia’s position, that any military operation against Iraq must be in keeping with international law. “There must be clear proofs” of allegations against Iraq, and it must also be shown “that no other means are possible” to resolve the issue. Putin added, with clear reference to Europe as well as Asian nations: “I should say that our position is not unique to us, that it is shared by a great number, I don’t hesitate to say, by a very great number of countries that take part in international relations.” The case of Iraq could in no way be compared with Afghanistan, he said.