

US press enlists for war on Iraq

By Bill Vann
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As the Bush administration prepares for a colonial-style war against Iraq, the US media increasingly assumes the role of a semi-official propaganda arm for the White House and the Pentagon.

On the television networks, news announcers speculate on when and how the US will “take out” Saddam Hussein. Even more significant is the near unanimity of the editorial pages of the major US daily papers in parroting the line of the administration and offering friendly advice on how best to prepare an Iraqi invasion.

Like their counterparts in the broadcast media, the editorial writers of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, not to mention other major dailies, accept the Bush administration’s justification for a war against Iraq at face value. They repeat the mantra of “weapons of mass destruction,” while offering high-sounding sophistry to buttress a transparent pretext for military aggression. This is the case in editorials published by the three papers on September 18 in the wake of Bush’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly and Iraq’s announcement that it would readmit weapons inspectors.

The *Times* begins its editorial by dismissing Iraq’s agreement to readmit weapons inspectors as “ambiguous.” It follows with a now familiar ritual for the paper: groveling praise for what it improbably portrays as the political prowess and oratorical skill of the occupant of the White House. The specific role of this organ of what passes for the “liberal” establishment is to provide an aura of legitimacy to an administration that assumed power on the basis of electoral fraud and judicial fiat and maintain the fiction that its policies are based on something other than the global appetites of the most criminal and reactionary elements within the ruling elite.

“The bill of particulars presented by President Bush last week was extensive and compelling,” the *Times* writes in reaction to Bush’s UN address, ignoring the fact that the president offered no evidence to substantiate his claim that Iraq represents an imminent danger to the people of the US and the world because it possesses stockpiles of unconventional weapons and is on the verge of deploying nuclear-armed missiles.

More perceptive—or rather, more honest—observers contrasted Bush’s appearance with that of Adlai Stevenson in October of 1962, when the then-US ambassador to the UN presented spy photos and other concrete evidence that the Soviet Union was building missile bases in Cuba. Bush presented no such proof, leading to the obvious conclusion that he possesses no convincing evidence to back up his allegations. His speech amounted to an ultimatum: either the UN rubberstamps a US war aimed at installing a puppet regime in Baghdad, or it will be condemned to “irrelevancy” and Washington will proceed without its sanction.

Citing Bush’s invocation of 16 UN Security Council resolutions allegedly violated by Iraq, the *Times* continues: “...if they were the only problems, it is doubtful that Washington would be pressing the UN toward a showdown with the Hussein regime. What makes Iraq the subject of intense concern ... is Mr. Hussein’s defiance of the Security Council’s longstanding instructions to dismantle Baghdad’s nuclear weapons program and to eliminate all its biological and chemical weapons and the materials used to make them.”

Thus, the newspaper takes Bush’s unproven charges about nuclear weapons as self-evident. It knowingly lies when it asserts that the Bush administration would not “be pressing” for war were it not for Baghdad’s supposed buildup of “weapons of mass destruction,” including nuclear devices. The most influential figures in the Bush administration—Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz—have been pressing for “a showdown with the Saddam Hussein regime” since the first Gulf war ended more than a decade ago.

After September 11, they sought to exploit shock and anger over the terrorist attacks to justify an attack on Baghdad, falsely claiming a link between the hijackers and Iraqi intelligence. Even after this lie was exposed, they continued to float unsubstantiated claims of a connection between Baghdad and Al Qaeda. Similarly, they attempted to tie last year’s anthrax attacks to Iraq, until evidence proved that the murderous letters had originated from within the US military/intelligence establishment.

They are left with “weapons of mass destruction” as the justification for war. Nowhere has the administration presented evidence to refute the assessment of Scott Ritter, the former US Marine who spent seven years as a top UN arms inspector in Iraq, who says: “Since 1998, Iraq has been fundamentally disarmed.” The administration cannot present a serious argument that a former colonial country devastated by US military might in 1991 and subjected to devastating sanctions ever since represents a dire and immediate threat to the world.

“Like most Americans, we would welcome a peaceful resolution of this crisis,” the *Times* sanctimoniously declares. But it is obvious that—whatever “most Americans” want—the Bush administration is not prepared to accept anything but war, no matter what concessions are made by Baghdad.

The cynics at the *Times* go on to state they have no illusions that a “peaceful resolution” is an option. Nevertheless, they argue, the best way to prepare for war is to maintain the pretence that the US is seriously interested in pursuing a peaceful alternative. Echoing the Bush White House, the newspaper demands that the UN Security Council “approve a tough new resolution reaffirming its disarmament demands, with a realistic deadline for compliance,” adding that the resolution “should include a clear warning that military force is likely to follow if Iraq balks.”

The editorial offers a piece of advice to the Bush war cabal, indicating a minor tactical difference. It urges the White House not to quibble over whether the Security Council passes one resolution or two—the first threatening war over inspections, and the second authorizing it. Washington “can’t expect to dictate every move to the UN,” it counsels.

The *Washington Post* is, if anything, more saber-rattling in its approach, headlining its editorial “The Inspections Trap.” The newspaper is full of praise for Bush. He “was right to take his cause to the United Nations,” whose support “could galvanize a broad coalition to destroy Baghdad’s weapons of mass destruction and replace Saddam Hussein with a stable and progressive government”—i.e., a US puppet regime.

The editorial warns that, even with full Iraqi cooperation, “an official

determination of whether and how Iraq is stockpiling weapons of mass destruction could take up to a year.” The US should not wait for such a determination, the *Post* advises, but should instead devise an “accelerated” inspection plan to include “specific triggers that allow for enforcement with the first act of Iraqi noncompliance.” It further urges continued “preparations for a possible military campaign ... so that dilatory action will invite consequences beyond toothless statements from the Security Council.”

The *Post* endorses an idea floated by sections of the American foreign policy establishment, namely, that any new weapons inspection program be supplemented by a military “implementation force.” This is precisely the type of demand—which would require Iraq to renounce any claim to national sovereignty and accede to the presence of foreign troops, including those of the US, on its soil—that is designed to be rejected. It is reminiscent of the ultimatums issued to Belgrade at the Rambouillet “peace talks” in 1999 that provided the pretext for the US and NATO to launch the war that had already been decided on.

Thus, while dismissing Iraq’s offer to readmit the inspectors as Saddam Hussein’s “latest gambit,” the editorial makes clear that the demand for inspections is not aimed at determining whether Iraq has actually developed the weapons that Washington claims, but rather at providing a pretext for a US invasion.

On September 22, the *Post* followed up with another editorial entitled “The Iraq Decision,” which explicitly endorses the Bush war plan, explaining that “the shock of 9/11 has given this country the lesson that, in an era in which enormous harm can be done by seemingly weak adversaries, threats such as that posed by Iraq must not just be managed but treated aggressively.” This is a justification for military action against any “weak” country that is perceived to be an obstacle to American imperialism’s global interests.

The *Wall Street Journal*, the paper whose editorial line most closely tracks the thinking of the extreme right-wing elements that dominate US foreign policy, is more openly contemptuous of the UN than the *Times* or *Post*. Seeking Security Council approval for a US war, it warns in its September 18 editorial, will “delay any action past the best invasion time of winter.”

The *Journal* makes no attempt to conceal the war lust that consumes the Bush administration. It flaunts it, declaring, “There is only one kind of inspection regime that can truly disarm Saddam—the 82nd Airborne, aided by armor and air power.”

Typical of the *Journal* editorial page’s penchant for employing the most improbable lies and slanders to further its political agenda is the suggestion that Saddam Hussein is somehow behind the recent outbreak of the West Nile virus in the US.

In keeping with its more shameless approach to beating the war drums, the *Journal* pointed in an editorial two days earlier to the real motive for war against Iraq. “The best way to keep oil prices in check is a short, successful war on Iraq that begins sooner rather than later,” it wrote.

That this is the real objective of the impending war is well known to those who run the editorial boards of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Behind the pretext of “weapons of mass destruction” and the “triggers” of weapons inspections, the aim of a war against Iraq is the seizure of its oilfields, second only to Saudi Arabia in terms of proven reserves, and the consolidation of unchallenged US control over the entire Gulf region.

A second, and related, aspect of the press treatment of US war preparations is the increasingly venomous tone and substance of commentaries denouncing Germany and Russia for withholding support for a unilateral US invasion. The *Washington Post*, for example, branded the two countries “appeasers of Saddam Hussein.”

In a separate editorial, the *Post* denounced the government of Vladimir Putin for invoking terrorism to justify a military intervention in Georgia,

characterizing it as a “stunningly brazen attempt to cloak an old-fashioned threat of military aggression in Mr. Bush’s new doctrine of preemption.” Apparently the editorial’s authors believe that the US holds the patent for that particular “cloak.”

The *Wall Street Journal* has published numerous editorial comments condemning German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s statements opposing a US war against Iraq, even opening up its editorial pages on the eve of the German elections to Wolfgang Schauble, the Christian Democratic Union’s shadow foreign and defense minister.

No attempt is made to objectively consider the conflicting interests of German and US imperialism or those of the regime in Russia. On this, as on all questions dealing with impending war, the elementary obligation of journalism to remain skeptical in the face of official pronouncements, to investigate, educate and inform the public have gone by the wayside. Whether the US has the “right” to unleash unprovoked wars against far weaker nations and impose governments of its own choosing is not even an issue. Instead, parroting the line of the Bush administration, these newspapers vilify any rival power that dares challenge US interests.

The consensus between the media and US foreign policy is not new. One can see in press barons like William Randolph Hearst and the “yellow journalism” that became notorious at the end of the nineteenth century, when American imperialism was cutting its teeth, a clear predecessor to the role the press plays today.

During the second half of the twentieth century, a new consensus between the supposedly “free press” and the government was founded on anticommunism, with the editorialists casting US actions on the world stage as a defense of “freedom” against “tyranny.”

Nevertheless, there was room within the establishment press for some degree of criticism and even opposition to American militarism and the more naked imperialist depredations of the ruling elite. It is instructive to recall that the *New York Times* defied the Nixon administration and published the “Pentagon Papers” in 1971, and the *Washington Post* began publishing the Watergate exposures of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein a year later.

Today, there is little of the old—and fraudulent—pretense that Washington is pursuing some higher calling, a democratizing global mission. Yet the media virtually excludes any hint of dissent from the government line. Instead, it seeks to terrorize the American people into acquiescing to a war on the grounds that it is necessary to prevent another September 11.

The solid front of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* in support of a neo-colonial war of conquest reflects two crucial political facts. First, the existence of a consensus in favor of war spanning the entire spectrum of US bourgeois politics. Second, the disintegration of American liberalism and its prostration before the most reactionary and militaristic forces within the ruling elite.

Underlying both of these political realities is the profound decay of American democracy. The lying and war-mongering role of the press is an expression of a more general collapse of democratic institutions and the absence of any faction within the ruling class committed to their defense. Such is the inevitable political corollary domestically of the eruption of American imperialism internationally.

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