

New York Times' Thomas Friedman: "No problem with a war for oil"

By Kate Randall and Barry Grey
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In recent weeks popular opposition to the impending war against Iraq has grown not only internationally, but also within the US. Even polls published by the pro-war American media show a sharp drop in support for Bush's war drive. A CBS News poll published January 7 reported that only 29 percent of Americans support unilateral US military action against Iraq, while 63 percent favor a diplomatic solution.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration continues its feverish military buildup in the Persian Gulf, with an estimated 160,000 troops now present or en route to the area. According to the same CBS poll, while a majority of Americans oppose a war, 74 percent believe it is inevitable—a feeling that owes a great deal to the prostration of the Democratic Party to the Bush White House and its general support for the administration's war policy.

The government's justification for an invasion—based on the claim that Iraq poses an imminent military threat—is becoming more and more threadbare. There is open discussion in the media that the failure of UN inspectors to find evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction is fueling public skepticism toward the administration's war agitation.

Recent events in Korea have further undermined the White House propaganda campaign. Government spokesmen have been unable to explain the disparity between American policy toward North Korea and the administration's war drive against Iraq. At least publicly, the administration insists that North Korea—which is openly developing a nuclear weapons capacity—is to be dealt with through diplomatic channels, while Iraq—where there is no evidence of nuclear weapons—is to be bombed, invaded and militarily occupied.

In the face of the failure of the government/media

campaign to build mass support for a US invasion of Iraq, *New York Times* foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman has felt obliged to come to the aid of the Bush war cabal by proposing a shift in its propaganda. Hence Friedman's January 5 column headlined "A War for Oil?"

In this thoroughly cynical piece, Friedman concedes what is obvious to anyone who has followed the US military buildup against Iraq with any objectivity: Bush's plan to invade the country is driven, above all, by a determination to seize control of Iraqi oil.

The column is by no means the first effort by Friedman to provide a cover of legitimacy and even humaneness to Washington's war drive. On December 1, for example, he authored a column in which he urged his readers to "pay no attention" to the inspections taking place in Iraq. Instead, to fabricate a pretext for war, he advocated that the United Nations, at the bidding of the US, kidnap Iraqi scientists, remove them and their families from Iraq, and allow American interrogators to extract "proof" of weapons of mass destruction from their captives. [See "Inventing a pretext for war against Iraq—Friedman of the *Times* executes an assignment for the Pentagon"]

At that time, Friedman had no quarrel with the official line that Iraq represented an imminent threat to the safety of Americans. But, despite the columnist's urging, millions of Americans have been paying attention to the weapons inspections—as well as the rising toll of layoffs and pay cuts at home—and have grown increasingly hostile to the administration's obsession with war, as well as to Bush himself.

Thus the "liberal" war hawk Friedman feels compelled to shore up the flagging credibility of the Bush administration's case for war. "Is the war that the Bush team is preparing to launch in Iraq really a war

for oil?” he asks. “My short answer is yes. Any war we launch in Iraq will certainly be—in part—about oil. To deny that is laughable.”

Friedman admits, quite openly, that the official reasons given by the government for a war against Iraq are lies, and crude ones at that. He writes that Bush’s “recent attempt to hype the Iraqi threat by saying that an Iraqi attack on America—which is most unlikely—‘would cripple our economy’ was embarrassing.”

He continues: “Let’s cut the nonsense. The primary reason the Bush team is more focused on Saddam [than on North Korea] is because if he were to acquire weapons of mass destruction, it might give him the leverage he has long sought—not to attack us, but to extend his influence over the world’s largest source of oil, the Persian Gulf.”

Thus, having acknowledged that the US government is lying to the American people and the world, Friedman seeks to fashion a new justification for war against Iraq. It is not a matter of self-defense, or even countering something Iraq has done. Rather, the country must be attacked and occupied because the regime might—in the future—extend its influence over the world’s largest oil reserves.

“There is nothing illegitimate or immoral about the US being concerned that an evil, megalomaniacal dictator might acquire excessive influence over the natural resource that powers the world’s industrial base,” he writes.

Leaving aside Friedman’s use of pre-packaged epithets to demonize the Iraqi ruler, this statement is remarkable for its espousal of a course that violates every cannon of international law. Friedman is asserting that the US has the right, unilaterally and preemptively, to attack any country or regime that it deems to be a threat to “the world’s industrial base.”

In other words, the US has the right to wage wars of plunder against those countries that stand in the way of its monopoly of vital natural resources. If, in the process, it violates the national sovereignty of weak and small countries, deprives the local populace of the benefits of resources located on its national soil, and kills untold thousands of people—so be it.

It is self-evident, Friedman would have us believe, that the world would be far safer and happier if the oil in the Persian Gulf were in the hands of

American-based oil giants and the US military machine than if it remained in the hands of the Iraqis.

But the implications of this argument go beyond Iraq and the Persian Gulf. If Friedman’s injunction is true for Iraqi oil, then why not for Russian oil, or that of Venezuela, Nigeria and other oil-possessing nations? Why, moreover, should America’s global mission be limited to the “protection” of oil? What about iron, copper, cobalt, uranium and other vital ores? Can the US permit other nations to get control of that other increasingly scarce strategic resource—water?

The logic of Friedman’s position is clear. It is a formula for imperialist aggression and plunder not seen since the heyday of the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. There is no essential difference between the impulse of global domination by means of military violence that underlies Friedman’s arguments and that which was summed up in the Nazi demand for “Lebensraum.”

In line with the “liberal” pretensions of the *New York Times* editorial board, Friedman tries to give his defense of imperialist war a progressive twist. Advocating a “politically-correct” policy of aggression, he argues that the “Bush team would have a stronger case for fighting a war partly for oil if it made clear by its behavior that it was acting for the benefit of the planet, not simply to fuel American excesses.”

“I have no problem with a war for oil,” he writes, “if we accompany it with a real program for energy conservation.”

Friedman concludes by declaring that an oil war in Iraq “would be quite legitimate” if, after bombing and conquering the country, the US helped “Iraqis build a more progressive, democratizing Arab state.” Here the *Times* columnist echoes the growing chorus of liberal apologists for American imperialism, who seek to attribute a historically progressive and humanitarian role to the single most violent and destructive force on the planet.

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