

Washington caught in "weapons of mass destruction" lies

New Iraq sanctions debate bares US-European tensions

By Bill Vann
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The US and Britain launched their illegal war against Iraq under the pretext that it was a crusade to eliminate the threat posed by Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction." The goal of "regime change," now realized through the devastation of Iraq and the slaughter of thousands of poorly armed soldiers and defenseless civilians, was sold as the only means of disarming Iraq.

The United Nations, both Washington and London insisted, had failed and would continue to fail with its weapons inspection regime. Iraq, they claimed, was in "material breach" of the UN weapons resolutions. It constituted a threat to world security and had to be disarmed by force.

With the US now an occupying power and anxious to move forward with the installation of a colonial-style protectorate and the exploitation of Iraq's vast oil resources, the debate over weapons of mass destruction, sanctions and inspections has reemerged, although in an ironically inverted form.

Having fought for a dozen years to maintain the punishing sanctions against Iraq, the US government is now demanding that they be scrapped. Russia and the European governments that had opposed the war and either supported or sympathized with Iraq's demands that the sanctions be lifted are now insisting that Washington cannot unilaterally alter the resolutions it pushed through the UN. Rather, they say, the US must return to the world body and establish that the required conditions have been met.

"Iraq has been liberated, the United Nations should lift economic sanctions on that country," President Bush declared in an April 16 speech to Boeing Aircraft workers. But the UN resolutions imposing sanctions included no references to Iraq's "liberation." Rather, they demanded that Iraqi biological, chemical and nuclear weapons and weapons programs be "removed, destroyed or rendered harmless" under the supervision of United Nations inspectors.

"This decision cannot be automatic," declared Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov at the end of a European Union summit that he attended last week in Athens. "It demands that conditions laid out in corresponding UN Security Council resolutions be fulfilled. For the Security Council to take this decision, we need to be certain whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction or not."

Russia joined the members of the EU in supporting a resolution that demanded: "The UN must play a central role, including the process leading toward self-government for the Iraqi people."

In the course of the month-long war, no banned weapons were used by Iraqi forces. News reporters—both those "embedded" with US military units and those merely in bed with the Pentagon—have repeatedly issued breathless accounts of chemical or biological weapons "finds" in Iraq. These reports have invariably been disproved, with "chemical weapons" turning out to be pesticides or some other harmless material.

The failure to date of the Pentagon to turn up evidence that any weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq poses obvious problems for the Bush administration. The unprovoked war was manifestly illegal, waged without the sanction of the UN and without any prior attack from Iraq. The absence of chemical or biological weapons would only confirm what millions around the world have already concluded: the justification for the war was nothing but a pack of lies.

In a frantic bid to uncover—or manufacture—the evidence it seeks, the Bush administration has constituted an "Iraq Survey Group," which is to include some 1,000 US intelligence agents and contract employees led by a US general, to scour the country for any trace of chemical or biological weapons.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, speaking at a meeting with Pentagon employees Thursday, acknowledged that whatever the US claims to find through this effort will be suspect. US inspectors, he insisted, were "trained in chain of control" and would safeguard any evidence. "That will not stop certain countries and certain types of people from claiming, inaccurately, that it was planted," he added.

The Bush administration has made it clear that it has no intention of readmitting the United Nations weapons inspectors to continue the work that was interrupted just two days before the US invasion, when they were evacuated from Iraq. Washington apparently plans only to ask the UN team to confirm any alleged finding made by the US intelligence agents in Iraq.

"We're not dogs on a leash," chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said. "We have a mandate from the Security Council, and credibility demands that we have independent judgment."

Blix maintained that the Bush administration's hostility to the resumption of the UN inspections stemmed from its failure to confirm the allegations it made in its attempt to win support for a US invasion. "We had credibility and we didn't lend it to their contentions, and I think that we were right and I think so far

nothing has proved us wrong,” Blix said in an interview with Associated Press on April 16.

“So far they have not found any weapons of mass destruction,” Blix said of the US military. He added that he was “perhaps a little more inclined to believe” Baghdad’s insistence that they had no weapons programs than he was before the war.

Blix charged that Washington had attempted, but failed, to lure UN inspectors into working in the US-controlled program.

The UN Security Council has asked Blix to report in a closed-door session next week on proposals to resume his work in Iraq. The US is expected to oppose any such move, fearing that the presence of UN inspectors could expose its own attempts to fabricate a justification for its military action.

Behind the continuing bitter dispute over the purported Iraqi WMDs and the related UN resolutions stand the sharply conflicting interests of the US and the European powers. Washington launched its invasion of Iraq as part of a long-planned strategy of asserting US hegemonic control over the world’s principal sources of oil. The immediate strivings of US energy giants, arms manufacturers, construction firms and others to reap profits off the slaughter constituted a powerful impetus for the war. More decisive, however, is a broader goal of achieving an economic stranglehold over American capitalism’s principal rivals in Europe and Asia through effective control of the world’s petroleum supplies.

Since invading, the US military has taken control of the 1,000 oil wells in southern Iraq as well as the northern oilfields surrounding Kirkuk. Upon entering Baghdad, it immediately secured the Oil Ministry building as much of the rest of the city fell prey to looters and arsonists. The Bush administration has reportedly selected the former chief of Shell Oil’s US operations, Philip Carroll, to serve as the US administrator of the country’s oil industry.

The Pentagon has conservatively estimated the cost of the US occupation of Iraq will run at least \$2 billion a month. As numerous administration officials have made clear, Bush expects to pay for the occupation as well as the reconstruction contracts he is handing out to his corporate friends with revenues from Iraqi oil exports. Moreover, advisors to the administration have unveiled detailed plans for the privatization of Iraq’s nationalized oil industry as the preliminary step towards transferring its control to US-based energy corporations.

Under international law, however, no one can begin tapping Iraq’s oil wealth without the UN Security Council first lifting sanctions. The only oil that Iraq has legally sold since the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 has been through the UN-supervised oil-for-food program established in 1995 to allow Iraq to purchase food, medicine and other humanitarian goods. Washington wants this program, which comes up for renewal at the beginning of June, scrapped along with the sanctions. In its place, it would substitute a US-run system for selling oil, securing imports and awarding contracts.

Having insisted for more than a decade on the strict enforcement of sanctions that are blamed by UN sources for the death of more than half a million Iraqi children, Washington is now cynically demanding their summary abrogation on “humanitarian grounds.”

The demand of Russia and the European Union that the UN play

a “central role” in the governance of Iraq and the running of its economy, together with the push for a UN Security Council debate and vote on any lifting of sanctions, is aimed at countering Washington’s hegemonic ambitions and defending Europe’s extensive interests in the region.

Russian diplomats have indicated that Moscow is prepared to link any lifting of sanctions to the return of UN inspectors and the installation of a “legitimate,” i.e., UN-supervised, government in Iraq. Russia’s interests include an Iraqi contract with Lukoil to develop the massive west Qurna oilfield, a deal potentially worth \$20 billion. France’s TotalfinalElf had secured development rights to approximately 25 percent of Iraq’s total oil reserves. Both countries expect the US to rip up existing contracts—which otherwise would go into effect with the lifting of sanctions—on the grounds that they were signed by an illegitimate regime.

Bringing Iraqi oilfields back to their pre-1991 levels, when they were producing 2.5 million barrels a day, is expected to involve some \$40 billion in investments. Unfettered US control of the country would effectively squeeze European capital out of that lucrative source of new profits.

The stakes for the energy conglomerates are decisive. “For the international oil companies Iraq is the best new opportunity in decades in the increasingly difficult challenge of finding new resources of oil in a world where the vast majority of reserves are in countries unwilling to let them in,” Tom Nicholls, editor of the international energy journal *Petroleum Economist*, told the *Financial Times* of London.

Washington has also indicated that it may press for the wiping out of a substantial portion of the \$116 billion in Iraqi debts to foreign governments and international lending institutions, much of it owed to Saudi Arabia, Russia and France. Without such debt forgiveness, a major share of Iraq’s oil revenues would have to be diverted into interest and service payments.

In the end, Europe may bow to bullying from Washington to accept US terms on ending the sanctions regime in the hopes of salvaging some portion of its economic interests in Iraq. Should it resist, it is likely that the Bush administration will defy international law once again and order the US military occupation authorities to begin pumping and selling Iraqi oil on their own. Either way, a criminal war of aggression is giving rise to acts of colonial-style piracy and a dangerous sharpening of tensions between the major imperialist powers.

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