

Why Oppose US War Against Iraq?

As US troops began to deploy, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee held hearings to discuss a proposed military assault to oust Saddam Hussein. These hearings were one-sided and failed to include any experts who would balance the pro-war testimony. Scott Ritter, a former chief weapons inspector for the United Nations, ex-Marine and “card-carrying Republican,” says all the evidence is against Iraq’s having any weapons of mass destruction, and the country “has in fact been disarmed” (contrary to US claims).

The Bush Administration has rejected Iraq’s offer to allow a Congressional delegation to tour suspected sites with experts of their choice. But a German TV crew did visit those sites recently, and their film shows facilities utterly destroyed or incapacitated. The Administration has also produced no evidence to support its claims that Iraq was involved in the Sept. 11 attacks or has any connection to al-Qaeda. Most intelligence experts doubt any connection.

Top military brass in the Pentagon say toppling Saddam Hussein could destabilize the entire region, and possibly lead to more terrorist attacks (Washington Post, July 28). Economic experts say a war with Iraq would disrupt oil flows and likely damage the fragile US economy (NYT, July 30). Most US allies oppose any US attack, including more than half the population in Britain, America’s closest ally (AP, Aug. 5).

And more importantly, the war would be entirely illegal. Without the approval of the Security Council, it would violate Article 51 of the UN Charter, to which the US is bound by treaty. Of course every US administration including the current one has refused to be bound by international law, but that is no reason to continue such illegal activities.

Not About Democracy

The Administration’s problem with Saddam is not that he is a brutal dictator. The US and Britain have a long history of supporting repressive regimes in the Middle East -- including Saddam -- to maintain control over the oil supply. One close US ally, Saudi Arabia, does not allow political parties, requires women to wear the veil and stay home unless accompanied by a male family member, and practices beheading. However, Saudi Arabia is the world’s #1 oil producing nation, generally supports US policies in the Middle East and serves as a base of operations for the US military. The US in turn provides for the regime’s defense.

Another close ally of the US was Iran after 1953, when the CIA backed a coup that overthrew leftwing reformist Mohammed Mossadegh, re-installing the Shah Reza Pahlavi – whose government executed thousands. By 1976, the Iranian secret police (SAVAK), trained and supported by the CIA, had a "history of torture which is beyond belief. No country in the world [had] a worse record in human rights than Iran," according to Amnesty International. The US got many military installations, electronic listening posts and airbases in Iran, and American oil firms gained a 40% interest in the Iranian oil consortium – until the Islamic revolution in 1978.

Friend or Foe?

The US also supported Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during its 1980-88 war with Iran, if sometimes covertly. The Reagan Administration secretly allowed Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt to transfer howitzers, Huey helicopters, bombs and other weapons of US manufacture to Iraq. Full diplomatic relations were restored in 1984, despite Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops. Then-Vice Pres. Bush and others in the National Security Planning Group had been active in a project to help Iraq build an oil pipeline to the Jordanian port of Aqaba in reaction to the Iranian blockade of Iraq's Persian Gulf ports.

Human rights activists criticized US support of the Iraqi regime, especially after Saddam's troops used poison gas against the Kurdish population in Northern Iraq. But the US Administration continued its support. Years later, preparing for the 1991 Gulf War, Pres. Bush noted, "He even gassed his own people," – without mentioning that Saddam had been a US ally at the time and for some time afterwards.

An apparent turning point came in April 1990, when Iraqi troops invaded neighboring Kuwait, another undemocratic kingdom on the Saudi model and a consistent US ally. Iraq had accused Kuwait of "slant-drilling" Iraqi oil fields (essentially stealing Iraqi oil) and considered Kuwait's demands for immediate repayment of Iraq's debts from the war with Iran to be an insult to Arab "unity." Iraq had also considered Kuwait to be part of Iraq's Basra province ever since 1920, when the British drew the "line in the sand" and created the Kingdom of Iraq (installing a Saudi sheikh).

But even after the 1991 Gulf War was ostensibly over, US Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf granted exceptions to the "no-fly zone" that the US and Britain had unilaterally imposed over Iraqi airspace so Saddam's military could once again massacre Kurds in the North and Shi'ites in the South.

Fish in a Barrel

The US war on Iraq will likely go down in history as one of the greatest travesties of the late twentieth century. Hundreds of thousands had marched in Europe and the US against the impending war, but their governments paid no heed. The Bush Administration claimed that Iraq had threatened Saudi Arabia, despite satellite evidence to the contrary and the fact that Saddam had no dispute with the Saudis. Bush also made much of an Amnesty International report of abuses by Iraqi troops, which was later withdrawn as erroneous. Stories that Iraqi troops had removed 312 premature Kuwaiti babies from incubators were later shown to be fabrications, called "propaganda" by the Kuwaiti hospital director.

Worse, the US and its Allies prosecuted the war with a shocking disregard for international law. Thousands of civilians died from US "smart bombs." Even after Iraqi troops withdrew from Kuwait, as required by the United Nations, the US announced it would continue the war. In February the US First Mechanized Infantry Division, using plows mounted on tanks and combat earthmovers, buried thousands of Iraqi troops alive (LA Times, Sept. 12, 1991), in 70 miles of trenches.

American pilots also bombed and strafed retreating Iraqi troops along the road to Baghdad, the so-called "turkey shoot." "Like shooting fish in barrel," they told the LA Times. "They were sitting ducks."

These actions were clearly war crimes (punishable in an international tribunal, were justice to be done), but US actions in Iraq in the years since have taken a far greater toll on the civilian population.

War Without End

A Harvard University study estimated in May of 1991 that 170,000 Iraqi children would die from disease and malnutrition due to US and Allied bombing of civilian infrastructure: water, sewage treatment, electricity. More recent estimates of the death toll due to this and the ongoing embargo put this number conservatively at over half a million. Before 1991, Iraq had been one of the wealthiest countries in the Middle East, with an ancient and rich culture, a high standard of living for most Iraqis and a secular government. Although Saddam's regime was a vicious one, and by no means democratic, the 1991 war and post-war sanctions have only strengthened his grip on the nation while punishing the Iraqi population.

The US has continually bombed Iraqi targets, sometimes once a week, for over ten years since the war supposedly ended. UN weapons inspectors and others have scoured the land searching for the alleged "weapons of mass destruction", but they have found nothing – or, rather, they have found weapons destroyed and facilities flattened. Ironically, the US itself has all these weapons, and has actually used many of them (notoriously the atom bomb), but Washington has historically resisted inspection of its own sites.

The inspection teams were not "thrown out" of Iraq, as former chief weapons inspector Scott Ritter has pointed out, but fled when the US announced one of its larger air strikes. Ritter also notes that the reason the teams were not allowed back is that the US used them to collect targeting data for its attacks.

What Can YOU Do?

Join the thousands of Americans and others who are speaking out against the proposed US attack on Iraq: write a letter to the editor, call or write your elected representatives, and work with others who are opposing this insanity.

AWARE, the local Anti-War Anti-Racism Effort, meets weekly at 5:00 pm Sundays at the Independent Media Center [address]. All are welcome.

August 2002