

IRAQ



The latest opinion polls show that British people oppose a war on Iraq by a ratio of 4:1. The government's media campaigners have failed to make a case for war and Downing St's 'dossier on Saddam' has been seen for what it is – a piece of war propaganda rather than evidence of an Iraqi threat.

In the USA, Al Gore has joined with church leaders and a new peace movement to warn that President Bush must not take America into an era of military adventurism. The divide opening up is not between countries but between decent people and bellicose governments. And the issues this will force us to address reach far beyond Iraq.

Let no one be in any doubt. Saddam Hussein is a cynical and calculating tyrant. He has been responsible for brutal crimes against those in his own country and beyond. So too has Ariel Sharon, Augusto

Pinochet and Robert Mugabe. There may be a compelling case to bring them all before a human rights court, but not to bomb the countries they have tyrannised.

There are two reasons, however, why Saddam will not be brought before a court. The first is that throughout the period in which he used chemical weapons against Iran and against the Kurds, we armed him, supported him and advised him. America supplied him with 'crop spraying helicopters' and provided access to logistics information to assist with 'calibration' of mustard gas attacks on Iranian troops.

From 1986 US Air Force officers worked with their Iraqi counterparts on the war strategy. While Saddam was spraying chemicals on the Kurds (which the US knew about) the American administration actually increased weapons transfers to Iraq. Bush would not want to explain any of this in an international human rights court.

The second reason why such a trial will not take place is even more compelling. If Saddam were left with nothing more than a paper bag to explode, President Bush would still demand his assassination. Bush wants regime change because he wants Iraqi oil. Iraq's unforgivable crime is not to have threatened the USA, the UK, Europe or any other state in the last 10 years. It is to have signed oil development contracts with Russia and France rather than the USA.

The Washington Post made no bones about this on 17th September this year.

"a US led ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could open a bonanza for American oil companies, long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries, and reshuffling world petroleum markets....."

American and foreign oil companies have already begun manoeuvring for a stake in the country's huge proven reserves of 112 billion barrels of crude oil, the largest in the world outside Saudi Arabia."

A negotiated peace in the Middle East would not deliver such a prize for the Bush Administration; a prize Bush wants to deliver to his main financial backers.

Many in the anti-war movement have already grasped the significance of 'crude' in the Bush war campaign. The mistake would be to believe that this is the top and bottom of it. Beneath the surface lies something far murkier and threatening.

On 3rd June 1997 a statement came out in the name of the 'Project For a New American Century'. It proclaimed that American Foreign and defence policy was adrift and needed a new strategic vision for the world. The statement called for a massive increase in US defence spending and a willingness to undertake pre-emptive action against anything that challenged US fundamental interests:-

"We need to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity and our principles.

Such a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and greatness in the next".

When they wrote this, Jeb Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and the dozen or more Mad Hatter signatories could hardly have dreamed that five years later George W. Bush, the 'chad' given President of America, would be presenting this as official US foreign policy.

Bush's document to the UN last month announced the terms of a new American imperium. Forget deterrence and containment. America will strike pre-emptively against its enemies with or without international support, with or without the sanction of international law.

There is no ambiguity to Bush's words – "As a matter of common sense and self-defence, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed." This is what drives the war agenda.

Bush will hit Iraq in the same way a drunk will hit the bottle. He will do it to satisfy a thirst not just for oil but, for this obsessive control. It will be a tragedy for the people of Iraq, not least because Bush will then feel the need for another bottle. Iran, Syria, North Korea, Central Asia and even China will fall under his gaze as Bush hunts around for the next hit. His armed forces strategy document 'Vision 2020' already talks of the need for 'full spectrum dominance' – the command of air, land, sea, space and information – in the 21st century.

What begins as imperialism will end anarchy. The abandonment of rules based systems and diplomacy – for all their imperfections – will gift the game to the terrorist. Bush is set to become bin Laden's greatest triumph and Mullah Rumsfeld his spiritual emissary. Why hunt the terrorist when you can find him in the mirror?

Americans themselves will have to be at the forefront of challenging the Talibanisation of US politics. But the rest of the world should not collude with its belligerent fundamentalism. If we cannot stop Bush bombing Iraq we must at least oppose him.

At the Labour conference, trade unions and delegates can make it clear that the Party, if not its leader, will oppose a war on Iraq. Labour MP's, when they return to parliament, may be denied a direct vote on the war, but we can vote against the means of financing it. When parliament is asked to approve the Defence Estimates we should vote against doing so. British taxes should not be used to send British troops to a war the British public do not support.

One way or another, in parliament or in concert with the wider anti-war movement, we have to send out a single clear message – neither the government, nor the Prime Minister, has the moral authority to presume Britain would pay a blood price for an oil contract. For Iraq and the Middle East, the problem has not been the lack of a war plan but the absence of a peace plan. That is the gap Labour must fill.

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