Cheney's brief for war: a mass of lies and historical falsifications

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US Vice President Dick Cheney spoke on two occasions last week, opening a political offensive by the Bush administration to propel the US into war with Iraq. The two speeches, which were virtually identical, were aimed less at "making the case" to the American public than at rallying support within ruling circles for the administration's war plans.

Over the past several weeks a ferocious conflict has been raging within the political elite, including the Bush administration itself, over plans for a US military assault in the coming weeks for the purpose of toppling Saddam Hussein and installing a puppet regime.

Prominent figures in the first Bush administration (1989-93) have come out openly against the present government's plans for unilateral action. Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser, earlier this month argued that an immediate conflict with Iraq could destabilize the region and undermine the "war on terrorism." He further suggested that the lack of evidence that the Baghdad regime represented an immediate threat would prevent the mobilization of an international coalition in support of a new war.

Former secretary of state James Baker, the man who two years ago directed the Bush campaign's machinations to block the counting of votes in Florida, published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* on August 25 arguing that the current administration was not going about "regime change" in Iraq in "the right way." Baker urged Bush to go to the United Nations Security Council and press for passage of a resolution requiring Iraq to submit to "intrusive, inspections anytime, anywhere, with no exceptions." If Iraq should refuse to accept such a resolution, or resist its implementation in any way, argued Baker, the US would "occupy the moral high ground" and could go to war with international support.

Cheney was directly responding to these critics in his addresses. He speaks for the most reckless and militaristic faction within the political establishment, which is intent on using American military superiority to impose—by force—a new division of the world, in which the US occupies a position of global hegemony.

The fact that it was left to Cheney, rather than President Bush, to make the case for a preemptive war against Iraq underscores the real relationship of forces within the administration. It is Cheney who calls the shots. Bush is little more than a front-man, held in well-earned contempt even by those who nominally serve under him.

The critics against whom Cheney is speaking do not oppose US aggression against Iraq in principle; rather, they argue for a somewhat more cautious approach to expanding American dominance of territory and resources in the Middle East. These elements are concerned that the Cheney faction is heedlessly pushing the US into a war without sufficient military or diplomatic preparation, without having adequately prepared public opinion in the US, and in a manner that will needlessly alienate Europe, undermine the Arab bourgeois regimes and destabilize international economic and political relations with incalculable consequences.

The venues for Cheney's speeches—the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville, Tennessee on August 26 and a gathering of Korean War veterans in San Antonio, Texas three days later—have their own significance. Aside from assuring a receptive audience, the choice of veterans' groups reflects the administration's strategy of first overcoming resistance within the military itself to an imminent attack that could entail substantial casualties and a prolonged military occupation of Iraq.

Beyond that, it is entirely in the nature of this administration to begin a public relations campaign by turning to the military for support. Cheney is quite consciously appealing to the military as a counterweight against critics in Congress, the State Department and the foreign policy establishment, including those within his own party, as well as figures within Bush's cabinet who are wary of a unilateral war in the Gulf.

The speeches were generally praised by the media, including its erstwhile liberal wing. They were treated as serious contributions to a political exchange. A *Washington Post* editorial (August 27), for example, termed Cheney's first speech "the Bush administration's most extensive and forceful statement about the danger posed by the regime of Saddam Hussein and the reasons for taking preventive action against it," and described Cheney as "passionate and persuasive" in delivering his warmongering message.

In fact, Cheney's remarks were composed of unsubstantiated allegations, historical falsifications and lies.

In making his case for war against Iraq, Cheney began by stressing that the war in Afghanistan and the proposed invasion of Iraq were merely the initial shots of an open-ended conflict. He told his Nashville audience, "But as Secretary [of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld has put it, we are still closer to the beginning of this war than we are to its end. The United States has entered a struggle of years—a new kind of war against a new kind of enemy." He went on to describe the military advantages possessed by the US that "will only become more vital in future campaigns."

In terms of the geographical limits of this conflict, Cheney asserted, "There is a terrorist underworld out there, spread among more than 60 countries." There are 189 members of the United Nations; according to Cheney, therefore, nearly one-third of the world is home to this "terrorist underworld" and presumably a legitimate target of US intervention.

Cheney's message was unmistakable: the American people must get used to decades of continual warfare.

To justify this bloodthirsty perspective, Cheney resorted to the tactic favored by the Bush administration since September 11, i.e., to deliberately sow fear and panic in the population. He declared, "9/11and its aftermath awakened this nation to danger, to the true ambitions of the global terror network and to the reality that weapons of mass destruction are being sought by determined enemies who would not hesitate to use them against us."

Such characterizations are intended to create a permanent state of anxiety among the American people. This has several purposes. It bolsters the effort to present the government, military and intelligence apparatus as

the sole protectors of the population against impending destruction, thus facilitating the gutting of democratic rights and the implementation of authoritarian measures.

This incendiary language is calculated, moreover, to undermine any rational appraisal of the September 11 attacks and any effort to investigate them. The Bush administration has relentlessly opposed an investigation into the terrorist attacks because it has much to hide. A serious probe would demonstrate that the government was, at the very least, guilty of criminal negligence, and, more likely, a deliberate stand-down of intelligence and security agencies. It would establish that the Bush administration seized on the events of September 11 to implement war plans that had been drawn up well in advance.

In last week's speeches, Cheney took his panic-mongering to absurd heights, warning of a new Pearl Harbor and comparing ravaged and impoverished Iraq to Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany.

The core of Cheney's brief for war against Iraq was based on several premises, none of which withstand scrutiny.

Reiterating the line advanced by Bush in his West Point speech last June, Cheney sought to drive home the idea that the "old doctrines of security do not apply" in the new world situation. "In the days of the Cold War," the vice president remarked, "we were able to manage the threat with strategies of deterrence and containment. But it's a lot tougher to deter enemies who have no country to defend, and containment is not possible, when dictators obtain weapons of mass destruction and are prepared to share them with terrorists, who intend to inflict catastrophic casualties."

Leaving aside the unproven and apocalyptic assertions, Cheney's argument is a series of non sequiturs. The notion that the US faced less of a threat when confronted by a highly developed society, the Soviet Union—which was armed with thousands of nuclear warheads aimed at every major American city—than it does today when faced by bands of guerrillas is a proposition that flies in the face of logic and common sense.

Moreover, the claim that preemptive war is a novel doctrine dictated by a new world situation is false, as is the attempt to present this policy as a defensive measure. In reality, the "Bush doctrine" is a revival of the strategy of "roll-back" advocated in the Cold War period by the most right-wing and bellicose faction of the American ruling elite. The "roll-back" proponents rejected the dominant policy of "containment" of Soviet influence. They advocated the aggressive use of military pressure and economic and political subversion to overthrow Soviet-backed regimes and isolate and destabilize the USSR. Now the ideological heirs of the "roll-back" zealots have become the dominant force in the political and military establishment.

Nor has a "preventive" war against Iraq or any other country been imposed on the US by the growth of terrorism, a phenomenon that is hardly new in the world. Rather, the collapse of the Soviet Union is seen within the American establishment to have created a "window of opportunity" for the US to exploit its military superiority to grab control of oil reserves and other vital resources, and impose American dominance over the entire planet.

In his speeches the vice president asserted that the Hussein regime in Iraq possesses an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons and is on the verge of developing a nuclear bomb.

Cheney declared, "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction; there is no doubt that he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. And there is no doubt that his aggressive regional ambitions will lead him into future confrontations with his neighbors..."

Cheney resorts to a rhetorical trick, repeating the phrase "there is no doubt," to obscure the fact that he is making bald assertions without any factual substantiation. What *is* beyond doubt is that *there is no proof* of these charges—at least, none that has been presented by the US government.

The "one instance" of Iraqi treachery Cheney cited in his Nashville speech was quickly exposed as false. "During the spring of 1995," said the vice president, "the [UNSCOM weapons] inspectors were actually on the verge of declaring that Saddam's programs to develop chemical weapons and longer range ballistic missiles had been fully accounted for and shut down. Then Saddam's son-in-law suddenly defected and began sharing information. Within days the inspectors were led to an Iraqi chicken farm. Hidden there were boxes of documents and lots of evidence regarding Iraq's most secret weapons programs."

On a Public Broadcasting System television news program two days later, former chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter refuted Cheney's version of events, accusing him of "rewriting history." Ritter told a PBS interviewer, "What Vice President Cheney said to the American people is tantamount to a lie. The CIA knows that Hussein Kamal, the son-in-law of Saddam Hussein, when he defected clearly stated that under his instructions all weapons programs were eliminated. This is fact. He didn't lead us to a document. The Iraqi government did."

In his San Antonio speech the following day, Cheney dropped the chicken farm anecdote. No one in the media noticed, or presumably cared. The lie had served its purpose.

As is the custom with US officials, Cheney attempted in his speech to portray Saddam Hussein as a demon, while ignoring the fact that the Iraqi leader was an ally of the US throughout much of the 1980s, and that Washington supported Iraq in its war with Iran (1981-88). Hussein is one in long line of former allies or CIA stooges who have run afoul of US interests and have been transformed into international pariahs. This list includes Panama's Manuel Noriega, Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, Somalia's Mohammed Farah Aidid and Osama bin Laden, one of the Islamic fundamentalists who were armed and financed by the US during the mujahedin war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

When Saddam Hussein was using chemical weapons against Iranian forces and Iraqi Kurds in the late 1980s, he was acting with the knowledge and tacit blessing of the US. A recent *New York Times* article (August 18) pointed out that "American intelligence agencies knew that Iraqi commanders would employ chemical weapons in waging the decisive battles of the Iran-Iraq war" and did nothing to stop them. One senior defense intelligence officer at the time, Col. Walter P. Lang, told the *Times* that US intelligence officials "were desperate to make sure that Iraq did not lose" to Iran. "The use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern," Lang commented.

The US supported Hussein and Iraq in its war with Iran because the American ruling elite perceived the radical Islamic regime in the latter nation to be the greater threat. Once the war was over and Iran weakened, Washington became alarmed at the prospect of a secular nationalist regime in Baghdad emerging as a power in the oil-rich region. American officials turned their attention to creating a pretext for war with Iraq, which they found in the Iraqi regime's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990.

It was subsequently revealed that US ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie, in a conversation with Hussein on July 25, 1990, had given a virtual green light, in diplomatic language, to the Iraqi action, commenting "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts." Furthermore, General Norman Schwarzkopf, on the orders of the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, drew up plans for a massive US military intervention in the Persian Gulf aimed against Iraq months before the invasion of Kuwait. By June 1990, Schwarzkopf was already conducting war games pitting hundreds of thousands of US troops against Iraqi armored divisions.

There are also indications that the US helped Saddam Hussein launch a program to develop anthrax as a biological weapon. The conservative French newspaper *Le Figaro* reported in 1998 that both the US and France

had supplied Iraq with strains of anthrax bacillus during the mid-1980s, after the Hussein regime had begun a secret biological weapons program in early 1985. Researchers at the American Type Culture Collection in Rockville, Maryland confirmed the report.

Cheney cited the US war in Afghanistan as supposed proof that America's motives in invading Iraq would be at once selfless and humane. "Today in Afghanistan," he declared, "the world has seen that America acts not to conquer but to liberate."

Such a statement would be laughable, were not its implications so sinister. Even as Cheney spoke, film and press reports documenting horrific war crimes in Afghanistan were continuing to emerge. American military forces and political leaders are implicated in the slaughter of hundreds, if not thousands, of captured Taliban soldiers. Hundreds more have been indefinitely jailed by the US, in violation of the Geneva Conventions. This is not to mention the many thousands of Afghan civilians who have been killed by US missiles and bombs.

The US intervention has plunged the country into an even more desperate state of poverty and anarchy, while doing nothing to weaken the grip of rival warlords over the people. The puppet regime of Hamid Karzai is so despised that its leading members must be guarded by US troops and are hardly able to travel outside Kabul for fear of being wiped out.

Cheney is, moreover, well aware that US war plans against Iraq call for saturation bombing of all key urban centers and that American military planners assume Iraqi civilian casualties will be far higher in the second Gulf War than in the first.

From an immediate political standpoint, perhaps the most significant aspect of Cheney's speeches was his dismissal of the urgings of James Baker and others, including numerous European leaders, that the Bush administration go first to the UN to secure a legal fig leaf before embarking on war against Iraq. The tactical issue—whether or not to use the issue of UN weapons inspectors as the pretext for war—continues to divide the Bush administration, according to various press reports.

On this question, Cheney spoke with unconcealed disdain for Baker's counsel. "A return of inspectors," he declared, "would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with UN resolutions."

The Bush administration faction around Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is hostile to the UN maneuver because it wants to establish the principle that the US will not be bound in its military actions and diplomacy by any international organization or legal code.

Cheney's speech, according to the US media, is a contribution to a public "debate" over war with Iraq. To ascribe to such demagogy any positive content, or suggest that it represents a democratic "give and take" between government and the people, is an insult to the population. In reality, the American people are not to be consulted at all. War with Iraq is to be imposed on the population by a political clique with the closest ties to the military and the far right—one that was brought to power by anti-democratic and fraudulent means. It knows it will face no serious opposition from the Democratic Party or what passes for the liberal establishment.

The war frenzy is being driven by two fundamental factors. First, the US is seeking to assert control of some of the world's key oil and gas resources, in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. War with Iraq will only be the first step toward establishing a de facto US protectorate in the region.

At the same time the eruption of US militarism is a response by the ruling elite to its malignant social and political crisis at home—a crisis for which it has no solution. The "war on terrorism" is meant to serve as a diversion from the consequences of economic recession, compounded by corporate criminality on an unprecedented scale. The stark contradictions of US society, above all, the vast chasm that separates the wealthy elite from broad layers of the population, are fueling the war drive and endowing it with a particularly violent character.