

HOME

by DANIEL STURM

In 2003, the United States will spend about \$400 billion on national defense (more than the next 15 largest national militaries combined), and its economy will be twice as large as its closest rival, Japan. In the history of humanity, no other nation has exerted so much military and economic power.

The Bush administration argues that as the world's lone superpower, the United States deserves special treatment. American soldiers should be granted immunity from the International Criminal Court. Today, George Bush threatens to proceed unilaterally with a large-scale invasion plan in Iraq. Is the price of defeating Saddam Hussein worth the loss of international prestige and good will? And does it make sense? To give readers a side of the story that is largely absent from mainstream media, City Pulse has sorted through case studies and interviewed experts, to present a series of arguments against the war.

City Pulse/Daniel Sturm

The chants were loud and boisterous last Saturday, when over 200 people gathered at Fountain Park in downtown East Lansing for a march and rally against the war on Iraq. Numerous groups and individuals brought drum, signs and banners. The event was sponsored by Direct Action, Students for Peace and Justice, People for Positive Social Change, FEMS, Radical Queers, ECO, Students for Economic Justice and Nightvision.

Cold War warriors

In August 1990, as the Soviet Union's superpower status reached twilight, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded his small neighbor Kuwait. Possessing a tremendous amount of oil "unparalleled in the world" would make Iraq an ideal candidate for a new superpower, he believed. Apparently, this was a provocative challenge. In 1991, President George

Bush, an old CIA hawk and cold warrior par excellence, called the desert despot's bluff with B-52 bombers and the ground operation "Desert Storm," with Iraqi casualties ranging from 50,000 to 300,000 dead. Miraculously, there were only 137 American casualties. Had technology made the United States invincible?

Eleven years after his father's Gulf War, and four months after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, President George W. Bush blamed the "axis of evil," Iran, Iraq and North Korea, for sheltering terrorists and fumbling with weapons of mass destruction. On Oct. 7, 2002, he raised the possibility of a new war against Iraq. "The danger is already significant, and it only grows worse with time. If we know Saddam Hussein has dangerous weapons today — and we do — does it make any sense for the world to wait to confront him as he grows even stronger and develops even more dangerous weapons?" Members of Bush's administration, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld and Collin Powell, were Desert Storm veterans bred and weaned on the Cold War ideologies of preemptive strike. With this preemptive strike in mind, the Cold War warriors quickly capitalized on the U.S.'s overwhelming military power, to preserve Washington's superpower status indefinitely.

"The Americans have used 9/11 as an occasion to assert that they are the only power in the world which can dominate. What they want to achieve other than establish this assertion is by no means clear," said the British historian Eric Hobsbawm recently in an interview in *The Observer*, a British newspaper. "The Iraq war has no rational justification at all. The United States would have to learn that there are limits even to its own power and I think with some luck this may happen, but right now the learning process has only just begun."

There are five good reasons that speak against the War in Iraq:

1. The logic of imminent threat

In its draft resolution to Congress, the Bush administration invoked its "inherent right, as acknowledged in the UN Charter, to use force in order to defend itself." Article 51 of the U.N. Charter does authorize the use of military force in self-defense, but only if a country has been attacked by another, or is under imminent threat of attack. Given that Iraq has not attacked the United States, the Bush administration took the strategy of referring to "the high risk that Iraq will employ [weapons of mass destruction] to launch a surprise attack against the U.S."

Therein lies the rub: According to Scott Ritter, an American U.N. Special Commission weapons inspector in Iraq for seven years, no such capability exists. In the 1990s, inspectors destroyed 38,500 prohibited chemical warheads, and 817 of Iraq's 819 Soviet-built ballistic missiles. Iraq simply does not have weapons of mass destruction or threatening ties to

international terrorism. Therefore, no premise for a war in Iraq exists. In Ritter's opinion, the threat to Iraq is about nothing more than domestic American politics and is based upon speculation and rhetoric rather than fact. The weapons inspector argues that the manufacture of nuclear weapons would emit gamma rays that could be detected if they did, in fact, exist.

The Republican Scott Ritter is probably the Bush administration's shrewdest critic. His book "War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You To Know" tells a different story than that of the president. According to Ritter, in 1998 a Republican-controlled Congress passed the Iraqi Liberation Act, adding legal weight to the administration's decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power. "It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime," the act states.

The U.S. military then used U.N. data to pinpoint possible areas of investigation as a source for choosing bombing targets in Desert Fox, a British-American bombing raid that took place Dec. 16-19, 1998, without U.N. Security Council authorization. Confrontation rather than resolution remained the rule.

On Oct. 1, 2002, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer even endorsed Hussein's assassination, saying regime change could be realized at the cost of just "one bullet." And George Bush said regime change would be "the only certain means" of removing the threat of Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction."

Anabel Dwyer

Anabel Dwyer, an adjunct professor in humanitarian law at Lansing's Cooley Law School, comments: "Instead of trying to admit that we have a good many of the same problems in the use of weapons of mass destruction – that we're in fact the great masters — we try to prove that the United States' controlling these weapons of mass destruction is the solution. Since 1945, with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our weapons of mass destruction are somehow good, whereas everybody else's are somehow evil. This makes no sense. It is very seriously fascist."

Bush blamed Iraq for possessing and producing chemical and biological weapons. But the United States has known this since it started supplying Saddam with nerve gas and related technology in the late 1980s. When the Amnesty International report listed countless Saddam atrocities, including gassing and torturing Kurds, the Reagan administration blocked a Senate resolution imposing sanctions on Iraq and continued to pursue good relations with the regime. Both Bushes have even quoted the Amnesty reports to garner support for their sanctions and wars.

James Jennings, president of the humanitarian aid organization "Conscience International," which has worked in Iraq since 1991, claims: "The evidence that Iraq gassed its own people is also not about a current event, but one that happened 14 years ago. If that did not constitute a good enough reason for going to war with Iraq in 1988 (which the U.S. did not even contemplate at the time), it certainly is not a good enough reason now."

2. The ripple effect

Following Sept. 11, Bush declared a war on terrorism and asserted the right to attack any country, organization or people without warning and at his sole discretion as part of it. "If you are not with us, you are against us," he said. Many international critics have pointed out concerns regarding a potential worldwide ripple effect.

In a letter sent to all members of the U.N. Security Council, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark attacked Bush's strategy as irresponsible. The letter reads, "Heinrich Himmler, who instructed the Nazi Gestapo 'Shoot first, ask questions later, and I will protect you,' is vindicated by George Bush. Like the Germany described by Jorge Luis Borges in 'Deutsches Requiem,' George Bush has now 'proffered (the world) violence and faith in the sword,' as Nazi Germany did."

The former U.S. attorney general points out that since Bush's declaration, other countries have claimed their own sovereign right to strike first and oust terrorists. India and Pakistan brought the world closer to nuclear conflict than it has been at any time since October 1962. The United States claims of the unrestricted right to pursue and kill terrorists, based on a unilateral decision and without consulting the United Nations, or revealing any clear factual basis for claiming its targets are terrorists, was wreaking world hatred.

International critics like the Indian writer Arundhati Roy have warned of the escalating dynamic of terror and counter-terror, leading not to peace, but more violence. Israel's response to terrorism hasn't brought Israelis more security. And retaliatory terrorism has yet to make Americans feel more secure.

Rosina Hassoun

The MSU anthropology instructor Rosina Hassoun says that it was likely that the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack would like nothing more than to induce a massive U.S. military response, possibly destabilizing the entire region. "It would increase support and followers of the radical Islamic movements and Osama bin Laden. There would not necessarily be an immediate mass response, but there would be a lag time and a slow groundswell that would have consequences in the region and for Americans, including 'terrorism' at home and abroad against Americans."

Hassoun, who has conducted interviews with more than 600 Arabs living in America, said the United States had been “particularly poor in predicting blow backs from our policies — for example, by supporting and arming Saddam Hussein and Shah of Iran.” Hassoun argues that having Great Britain as its major ally increased anti-Western sentiments in the Middle East. In the first half of the 20th century, the British Empire brutally oppressed Arabs, as in 1936-37 when more than 3,000 Palestinian men were hanged in village squares in order to put down a commercial strike. “And the memory of colonialism is still fresh in the minds of the Arab people.”

City Pulse/Kathy Kuhn

Among area residents who went to Washington for the antiwar demonstration over the weekend were (l-r) LCC student Mike McCurdy, MSU student Michelle Allen and LCC student Nkechi Okeasor.

Direct occupation of Iraq by U.S. troops is likely to spark an anti-western, anti-American and anti-colonial response, Hassoun believes. “This will destabilize vulnerable regimes like the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian monarchies,” she said. In reflecting on the Bush administration’s military plans, she felt reminded of an old saying her Arab grandfather, who saw the demise of both the Ottoman Turkish and the British empires, told her: “The Arab world buries its conquerors.” If the United States decides to take up direct residence in the region, “it may learn the hard way,” not because the Arabs have some kind of superiority, but because of the complications, tragedies, and “general mess of the region.”

Early in October, CIA Director George Tenet issued a warning that it might be a terrible mistake to attack Iraq, indicating a possibly negative counter-effect. Despite White House claims, the intelligence report concluded that Saddam Hussein was currently unlikely to initiate a chemical or biological attack against the United States, but “should Saddam conclude that a U.S.-led attack could no longer be deterred, he probably would become much less constrained in adopting terrorist action.” In other words, there is more danger of an attack if the United States launches a precipitous invasion. Jacqueline Cabasso, executive director of the Western States Legal Foundation, shares this opinion: “It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to predict that if Iraq is attacked by the U.S., it might launch whatever it has at Israel — itself a nuclear power.”

3. The Costs

“Whatever we do will have implications locally,” Lansing Mayor David Hollister reflected in a late summer interview. “Five years ago we were in the process of de-escalating the Cold War, dismantling missile systems. Redirecting the money towards urban areas and health care seemed to be disengaging from a war mentality.” In August, Hollister still hoped for reimbursement for increased security costs because of 9/11, but it’s more likely that local governments will have to fork out much more.

According to the non-profit organization National Priorities Project, in 2002 Lansing residents paid \$96 million in federal taxes for the military budget. The tax money is being used for military construction, defense and for nuclear weapons. NPP Research Director Anita Dancs estimates if the U.S. decided to go to war, Lansing residents will pay an additional \$27 million. This year, Michiganders paid roughly \$10.3 billion in taxes to the Pentagon. A war against Iraq would cost Michigan taxpayers \$2.9 billion, with an estimated total spending of \$100 billion.

Democratic and Republican careers are also heavily affected by donations from the defense industry. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, beginning with the Persian Gulf War in 1991, defense corporations have increasingly lost interest in the Democratic Party. Whereas donations were spread almost evenly midway through Bush term in 1990 (54 percent/46 percent), in 1998 Republicans received 68 percent, and they received 65 percent in the election cycle of 2000 – a trend undoubtedly also influenced by the Clinton's administration's decision to decrease military spending. In 2002 the Bush family's political party received a whopping \$6,920,708 in donations from defense companies.

Concerned about the huge amount of military expenses, which already climbed from \$350 billion to \$400 billion, Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) said Oct. 9: "At a time when this country has a \$6 trillion national debt and a growing deficit, we should be clear that a war and a long-term American occupation of Iraq could be an extremely expensive proposition. Unlike the cost of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which was shared among the international community, the U.S. will have to pick up the entire cost, which could run into hundreds of billions of dollars."

In his recent book, "The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq," Kenneth M. Pollack strengthened these economic concerns. Pollack argues that the idea that Congress would be willing to finance a long occupation of Iraq and to appropriate billions of dollars for Iraq's reconstruction at a time of recession and rising budget deficits was irresponsibly optimistic. The author, a former CIA officer, still considers an invasion of Iraq to be the least risky of the options available to the United States, but argues that it would require an overwhelming force — 200,000 to 300,000 troops, at least. Pollack believes the operation would be irresponsible without the support of key governments in the area (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and some states of the Gulf Cooperation Council), from some European allies, and with the express authority of the United Nations Security Council.

In his book "Iraq: From Summer to Saddam" the British author Geoff Simons describes the process through which the United States managed to get support from Iraq's neighbors. Prior to Operation Desert Storm in 1991,

Simons wrote, the United States managed to “bribe” Egypt with \$14 billion, Turkey with \$8 billion and Syria with \$1 billion and to approve a \$250 million loan to Iran from the World Bank. Simons’ book documents the process through which anti-Iraq feeling was stimulated in the Middle East and how George H.B. Bush, whose reputation had long been bedeviled by the “wimp factor,” took the chance to turn the affair to his political advantage.

4. Zombification of the American people?

Lewis Siegelbaum

Lewis Siegelbaum, a Russian historian and chairman of MSU’s History Department, says it would be naive to believe that by “standing up” to Hussein, the United States will show the world that it means business. “This variant on the Cold War domino theory in fact is 100 percent wrong,” Siegelbaum said. “By taking military action against Iraq, the United States is sure to foment resentment throughout the Arab and Islamic world (at least).”

In an interview, Barry Romo, a national coordinator for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, pointed out parallels with Vietnam. “We keep changing why we’re there. First we’re there for weapons of mass destruction, then we’re there for the oil, for regime change, and now we’re finally there for credibility. This is like Vietnam in the ‘60s!” He says the Bush administration uses moral excuses in an effort to cover up its true agenda, which was a so-called New World Order to keep up and extend U.S. hegemony.

But the Vietnam veteran says that the Iraqi military and Saddam Hussein cannot be compared with the Vietcong or Ho Chi Ming. “There is no moral equivalent, there is no military equivalent and no political equivalent.” Romo, who served in the infantry in Vietnam, said Arab solidarity was a real factor in U.S. politics, a “tar baby that you can get stuck on to.” He believes that once the United States goes to war with Iraq, the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will probably start an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and cover it up as a respectable “war against terrorism.”

Money is spent and an avalanche of propaganda is fabricated in order to keep the politicians in power, says Siegelbaum, and he points out that propaganda is something an historian of Russia can analyze well. “[It’s] an attempt by the neo-fascist — and I don’t use that term lightly — White House clique (e.g., Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Perle, Rice, and, yes, sadly now Powell too) to consolidate its hold over American politics in the wake of the ‘close call’ election of Bush in 2000, the evident inability of the ‘loyal opposition’ (the Democrats) to provide any opposition, and the zombification of the American public. Appalling and frightening.”

5. Human Rights

Bob Edgar

At a Rally for Justice and Peace in Lansing Friday (Oct. 25), Bob Edgar, a former congressman who is general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, spoke of hypocrisy. "The president was wrong in his selection of the 'axis of evil.' The real axis of evil is the endemic of poverty, the rape of planet Earth, and the proliferation of weapons. If we really want to fight terrorism, we have to address the systemic issues dealing with poverty. I think we have to recognize that 80 percent of the world's population lives in substandard housing, 70 percent can't read or write, 50 percent go to bed hungry, and only 30 percent of the world's population are Christian."

Edgar, whose ecumenical organization represents 50 million Christians in the United States, said that unfortunately Bush has avoided meeting with National Council of Churches representatives, who've recently collected 110,000 signatures against the war. "The president has been quick to meet with evangelical conservatives and historic black church urban leaders, but has been less willing to meet with the mainline community." Robert Roth, director of the Shalom Center for Justice and Peace in Okemos, added that he couldn't understand why Bush, a United Methodist, wouldn't meet with the bishops of his own church, and how he even turned down the South African peace icon Nelson Mandela.

Edgar criticized the media for its portrayal of Iraq. "When TV crews do a story on Iraq, they show a picture of Saddam Hussein holding a rifle. I want them to show pictures of children holding up empty bowls, in part due to our sanctions."

Mahmoud Mousao

Mahmoud Mousa, president of the Islamic Center in East Lansing and originally from Egypt, said: "Children are dying because of lack of food and medicine. There has been a strong movement to lift sanctions, but instead of discussing this we discuss a war to create even more devastation."

Since 1990, the mortality rate for children in Iraq has risen 10 times faster than Rwanda's, even including those children killed in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In 2000, the rate of Iraqi children dying under the age of 5 was 160 percent higher than 1990, according to UNICEF. Yet, individuals responsible for the Rwandan genocide are today facing the war crimes tribunal, while those responsible for children dying in Iraq are free from the judgement of courts.

Public Opinion

Does the public support this war? Darren Davis, MSU's director of Public Opinion and Political Participation in the Political Science Department, conducted a national survey immediately after Sept. 11 funded by the National Science Foundation. "The terrorist attacks increased trust in government, but at the same time created intense fear. One of our most profound results is that when you expose people to this type of fear, they tend to support policies that they wouldn't otherwise support."

Darren Davis

For a follow-up study, which he and his colleague Brian Silver have scheduled for January 2003, Davis expects fear to decrease. This could mean support for Bush's proposed military action against Iraq could crumble. But Davis points out that there could also be a counter-effect to this, which he calls "the rally-around-the-flag effect." This means that American citizens as well as members of Congress might continuously be willing to set aside their differences in the case of a foreign threat. He said whether the people supported war against Iraq depends entirely on Bush's capability to keep this high level of trust and patriotism going.

Voices in the Wilderness

Many are skeptical of Bush's supposed concern for the Iraqi people's well-being. A massive bombing campaign against Iraq's capital of Baghdad, a city with more than 5 million inhabitants, is unlikely to secure human rights for those in the region.

Ramzi Kysia, a coordinator of the anti-war organization "Voices in the Wilderness," recently sent a letter from Baghdad, which he describes as a "truly green" city with a striking blend of architecture and with no tanks in the streets and no civil defense drills. Kysia lives in Baghdad now with a handful of other Americans who traveled there to learn the stories of the Iraqi people.

"Ask an Iraqi about 'liberation' and they'll laugh at you. It's bitter mirth. If the U.S. doesn't bomb the civilian infrastructure again then only a few thousand innocent people will be killed when George Bush starts his war. But if Bush bombs the water and power systems like his dad did in '91 — tens of thousands will die from the resulting epidemics. If the army falls apart, there could be a civil war that makes past conflicts in Lebanon or Bosnia look like schoolyard brawls." Kysia's letter ends with the question: "This is the moment when we all must ask — what are we willing to risk for peace?"

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@city-pulse.org. View our Letters policy.

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