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War drive

# Against the machine

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### **Anthony Bégrand interviewed Gilbert Achcar for the French revolutionary socialist newspaper, 'Rouge'.**

*WHAT do you think of the argument advanced by Bush as a justification for the war that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction?*

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Paris, 15 February

It is obviously a pretext and not an argument, in the sense that the accusation has been made from the beginning without proof. Since the start of the UN inspections, a number of US leaders (Donald Rumsfeld in particular) have said on several occasions that the inspections had no purpose and that they could not demonstrate the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction. This is a very surprising logic that demands that Iraq demonstrate what it does not possess. But it is obviously impossible to prove that one does not have something.

The entire UN inspections operation was then intended to win time for the deployment of troops and equipment and give the impression to US public opinion that the US had taken the trouble to go through a legal procedure and taken account of international law before going to war.

In other words, the result has been decided in advance. If the inspectors discover that there is a violation, the US will consider it has the right to go to war, and if they discover nothing, that proves nothing. Because if you can't find something, that doesn't prove that it doesn't exist.

Colin Powell, before the UN Security Council, also sought to show that the inspections had no point, claiming that equipment was moved whenever the inspectors arrived somewhere. It is obvious then that this is only a pretext, for a war that has long been decided on in principle.

We should always remember that so far as the supreme weapons of mass destruction, nuclear arms, are concerned, even Washington does not claim that Baghdad possesses them. Bush, in his September speech to the UN General Assembly, said that if Iraq procured fissile material (uranium), it could have nuclear weapons within a year. Now it is recognized that the country has neither nuclear weapons nor even fissile material. This is a striking illustration of this very particular notion of a 'preventive war' which does not involve taking defensive measures against an adversary who has shown their intention to attack, but rather involves attacking an adversary to whom one attributes the intention of wanting to acquire weapons that they still do not have. The most total absurdity reigns.

As for chemical or biological weapons, Iraq has possessed them for many years and has even used them against the Kurds, in the North, and against the Iranian troops, in the context of the Iran-Iraq war. At the time, this caused no indignation in western capitals. The necessary material for these weapons had moreover been provided by western companies, with the knowledge of the western powers. Since then, the country has been subjected to seven years of UN inspections that destroyed the stocks. Supposing even that something remains in Iraq, if one takes account of the fact that the country has no missiles, it cannot constitute a threat to its environment and still less to the US, which, like Israel, holds significant arsenals of weapons of mass destruction.

Let's add that the argument of the installation of democracy is also a farce, when most of the despotic Arab regimes of the region are closely linked to Washington.

*What are the real aims of the Bush administration then?*

The real aims have been stressed several times. First and foremost, there is oil. Iraq holds the world's second largest oil reserves, after Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Iraq's oil production is currently at a third of its objective production capacity, and in the coming years it will be necessary to increase it to avoid prices climbing. But to increase Iraqi oil production, the embargo has to be lifted so that the infrastructures can be reconstructed and modernized.

To lift the embargo, Washington considers regime change an indispensable condition, as is the cancellation of the concessions granted by Baghdad in recent years to French and Russian oil interests. It is about ensuring that the lion's share of the exploitation of Iraqi oil goes to the US.

Then there is the enormous market of the reconstruction of Iraq, a country which was systematically destroyed in 1991 and has not really been able to reconstruct because of the embargo.

These are the real aims. Beyond that, this step forward in US control of world oil reserves is a significant boost to its world hegemony in the face of all their possible rivals, including the vassal powers of western Europe and Japan, who are still more dependent on oil from the Gulf region than the US is.

*What are Bush's plans for a new regime?*

Since the beginning of the war preparations, the US has envisaged establishing itself militarily and durably in Iraq. Some months ago, they envisaged coupling a military occupation with the establishment of a puppet government, but one made up of a sort of representation of the ethnic groups of the Iraqi population. However, as the Iraqi opposition that they are trying to organize offers a far from brilliant spectacle, and the force which appears as dominant in the opposition - the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq - which is ready to deal with Washington, is closely linked to Teheran, it seems that the choice now is to have a direct military government of the country.

This is the big difference between the first Gulf War, in 1991, and the current situation. If the US did not overthrow Saddam's regime in 1991, it was because the world situation and the internal situation in the US forbade any military installation. Washington preferred to keep Saddam Hussein in power to avoid the Iraqi situation escaping from its control and destabilizing the region. Thus, Washington deliberately spared the Republican Guard.

Faced with the insurrection that shook the country after the end of the war, in March 1991, the US allowed the regime to drown the rebellion in blood, in the South and the North. In the South of the country, the US army even withdrew to allow a passage for the Republican Guard, and the US authorized the Iraqi regime to use helicopters for repression. There were tens of thousands of deaths.

If today the US has fixed itself the objective of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, it is because they believe the world situation has changed - the gap has grown with the rest of the world, in particular on the military plane - as well as the internal situation. The political climate following September 11 has been interpreted by Washington as the possible opening of a long period of military interventions virtually without limit, under the pretext of the war on terror.

*It seems the US has embarked on a period of military deployment across the entire planet...*

Absolutely. The US, since September 11, has begun to cover the whole of the planet with a network of military bases, directly, through alliances, or the two combined. Using the pretext of the war in Afghanistan, they have built military bases at the heart of central Asia. They have established themselves in the Caspian basin, which is a significant

region in terms of energy supplies, but also a region of considerable strategic importance since it is situated at the heart of the continental mass stretching from Russia to China, two countries considered as potential rivals.

There has also recently been a new round of enlargement of NATO, which has involved the former Soviet Republics. If one adds to that the whole programme of military intervention proposed by the Bush administration, we have effectively today an unequalled degree of military expansion of the US, which intervenes already militarily in the Philippines, Colombia, the horn of Africa and Yemen. They threaten Iran and North Korea, two countries lumped with Iraq in Bush's 'axis of evil'. They also make permanent efforts to overthrow the Chavez regime in Venezuela.

Washington, since the end of the Cold War, has set as its objective increasing the military gap between the US and the rest of the world, to the point that they now account for 40% of world military expenditure and we are approaching a situation where they will soon spend as much as all the other countries on the planet.

However, this superpower is not all-powerful. There is an Achilles heel, a power capable of blocking the war machine and reversing this militarist drift; the US people. The latter have already shown during the Vietnam war, their ability to stop the war machine. This mobilization had the effect of preventing the massive use of the US war machine until the first Gulf War. There is then a basis for hope in the remarkable development of the anti-war movement in the US in recent months. Nobody imagined, barely a year after September 11, that the movement would surpass in breadth anything known since Washington renewed its large-scale military operations. The progress of the anti-war movement continues. It combines with the youth radicalization which is expressed particularly in the movement for another globalization.

That said, given the time schedule, it is highly improbable that the war against Iraq can be stopped. However, to avoid any demoralization, the target now has to be the construction of an anti-war movement in the long term, given that we face a programme of long-term military intervention. Washington has said that the 'war on terror' will last several decades. We have to build a movement to stop this machine and halt the aggressive course of US policy.