

War by Timetable

By Paul Rogers | February 24, 2003

The huge antiwar marches and events around the world on the weekend of 15-16 February 2003 may be the most significant political demonstrations since the cold war era. In their scale, they resemble the 1986 and 2001 “people power” movements in the Philippines that removed Presidents Marcos and Estrada, and the mass outpouring of popular feeling across the Soviet bloc in 1989.

If the size of the demonstrations greatly exceeded the expectations of the organizers, their timing was also important. They closely followed the report from Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq, to the UN Security Council that was clearly far too soft for the Bush administration. One evident implication of Blix’s tone and content was that inspections should continue. Indeed, a significant part of his speech was devoted to detailing the impressive inspection process that has been built up in only eleven weeks, as well as the substantial expansion in UNMOVIC’s activities that is currently under way.

This combination of popular discontent, Security Council discussion, and the concurrent splits in NATO have combined to refocus intense attention on the political process, leading to a central assumption that the risk of war is primarily dependent on what happens at the United Nations.

This may be missing a key element. While so much emphasis is on the UN and attitudes in western capitals, what is actually happening on the ground may be the real determining factor of what happens next. In this respect, the pivotal reality at present is that the Pentagon is simply not yet ready for war against Iraq.

Planning for the Full Moon

By 14 February, there were about 106,000 U.S. forces in the Central Command area that covers the Gulf, with perhaps 10,000 more in Turkey (see Global Security (www.globalsecurity.org) for the most recent information). The Gulf forces are made up of 26,000 Army troops, 20,000 in U.S. Air Force units and 60,000 in the Navy and Marine Corps. The army and marine troops together comprise no more than 50,000, about one third of the ground forces that need to be in place before a war starts.

Most of the equipment is already there, and at least 1,000 troops a day are now being flown into the region. Even so, the key additional component is the highly mobile 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell in Tennessee, regarded as essential for a rapid war that will see the near-simultaneous use of a massive air bombardment and rapid ground force invasions from both the south and north of Iraq.

The 101st Airborne will not be in place for another four weeks. In the past few days, huge quantities of the division’s equipment have been loaded onboard two Military Sealift Command ships, the USNS Dahl and the USNS Bob Hope at Blount Island near Jacksonville in Florida (as reported in *The Tennessean* newspaper). The supplies include nearly 300 helicopters and 3,800 trucks, together with spare parts, food, and medical supplies.

Both ships were due to sail earlier this week, and they will take up to twenty-one days to make the transit to the Gulf. Once there, the process will begin of unloading equipment, matching it to the troops who will have been flown in and preparing the forces for highly mobile deep strike attacks into Iraq. This is likely to be completed by about 15 March, by which time most of the other U.S. forces, including further aircraft carrier battle groups, will have been assembled.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the latter part of March is considered by the military to be an appropriate time for an invasion, as the cloudy winter weather will have largely been replaced by clear days. Another preference is for moonless nights, enabling more effective use of night-vision equipment where the U.S. forces have a huge advantage. With a full moon due on 18 March, this would make 25 March



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

the most likely starting date of the war—quite a lot later than most analysts have been predicting.

Sand in the Machine of War

There are other possible factors to be taken into account. The current U.S. and UK air operations over the no-fly zones could be ratcheted up substantially, but this could well lead to some kind of pre-emption by some Iraqi forces. Such an action, and reaction, cannot be ruled out. If the Saddam Hussein regime eventually decides that a U.S. attack is inevitable, and that action through the UN is irrelevant, then it could well decide to start the war before all the U.S. forces are ready.

A further complication is the current lack of agreement between the U.S. and Turkey. While this may be quickly resolved, this could also mean that it will be late March before the required U.S. military forces can be assembled there.

What does all this mean for the political process? There are three aspects to this. First, there is time for anti-war movements to develop further across Europe and possibly even in the United States. They have been remarkable in their recent speed of development and have come together before a war has even started. At the very least they will put further pressure on governments, with Britain and Spain being particularly significant. In both countries a palpable unease about the march to war is now being reflected in opinion polls showing a loss of support for the governing parties.

Second, the Bush administration could give the impression of reluctantly allowing more time for the political process at the United Nations, knowing full well that it will not even be ready to go to war for several weeks. Then, by mid-March, it can express its utter dismay at the lack of progress and declare that there is no alternative to war, having gone the last step for peace.

But it is the third aspect that is crucial—the pace and development of the UN inspection process in Iraq. As Hans Blix has indicated, this is already intensive and is still in the process of speeding up, as U-2 spy-plane flights start, the helicopter fleet becomes

fully operational, pilot-less drones are brought in, and French and Russian reconnaissance aircraft join the group.

It is always possible that the UNMOVIC inspectors will actually find the much-vaunted smoking gun revealing the existence of Iraqi biological or chemical weapons, but if they do not, then the very intensity of their operations means that it would become more difficult for the United States to take the war route.

Moreover, the Saddam Hussein regime still has much to gain by offering a degree of cooperation. Its ideal position in late March would be widespread international opposition to the war coupled with a vigorous inspection process, the two making for a delay in the start of U.S. military operations stretching right through April.

Five Weeks Away

What, then, is the likelihood of war? To get as accurate an answer as possible to this, military planning is the vital consideration. All the indications are that the military build-up has been going on regardless of the political process and that there is a real sense of frustration among Bush's security team over the involvement of the UN. The bottom line is that everything will be in place by mid-March or very soon after; war is planned to begin around five weeks from now.

Alliance disunity, popular anti-war movements, and problems at the United Nations are all annoying complications, but to the security hawks they are not particularly relevant. The war is going to happen. Given the absolute determination of people such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and others, it is going to be very difficult to stop it.

*(This article was first published in its entirety on the global issues website (online at www.opendemocracy.net) as part of an ongoing debate about Global Security. Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University and is openDemocracy's international security correspondent. He is a consultant to the Oxford Research Group. The second edition of his book *Losing Control* has just been published by Pluto Press.)*