

The New York Times and Bush's threat of World War III

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When President Bush used an October 17 White House press conference to threaten that the escalating US confrontation with Iran posed a danger of "World War III" his remark was passed over in silence by most of the media. Those that did report it seemed, for the most part, to accept the White House claim that the president was engaging in hyperbole and merely making a "rhetorical point."

In the nearly two weeks since, Bush's remark has been followed up by a menacing speech by Vice President Dick Cheney, whose vow that the US would not "stand by" as Iran allegedly pursued a nuclear weapons program constituted an implicit threat of war. The heated war rhetoric has also been accompanied by the imposition of another round of sweeping economic sanctions backed by the unprecedented US designation of sections of Iran's security forces as "proliferators" of weapons of mass destruction and as a "foreign terrorist organization."

Given the Bush administration's claim to be engaged in a permanent "global war on terrorism," this designation is tailor-made for justifying a US military assault on Iran.

These events, undoubtedly accompanied by behind-the-scenes preparations for military action, have led to a somewhat belated reaction to Bush's invocation of a third world war. Over the weekend, several Democratic legislators took issue with the president's ominous statement. Senator Barbara Boxer of California, for example, called Bush's World War III statement "irresponsible."

"I've been briefed by the Pentagon who say if there were to be a conflagration with Iran, which we all hope to avoid, it would be generations of jihad right here on our shores," she said. "We don't want to go that way, so let's calm down the rhetoric."

Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also warned of the implications of a war against Iran, including the potential closing of the strategic Strait of Hormuz. He made clear that he believed that the military option should be kept "on the table," but urged the White House to stop talking about it.

"Don't give them the weapon that they use against us that we're trying to bully them, that we're trying to do dominate them," he said. "And that's what this hot rhetoric does when it's just constantly repeated, about World War III or that we're going to use a military option."

Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), also warned against the confrontational approach taken by Washington.

“My fear is that if we continue to escalate from both sides that we will end up into a precipice, we will end up into an abyss,” he said. “The Middle East is in a total mess, to say the least. And we cannot add fuel to the fire.”

Perhaps the most extraordinary response from within the political establishment came on Monday in the form of a lead editorial in the *New York Times* entitled “Trash Talking World War III.”

The *Times* writes: “America’s allies and increasingly the American public are playing a ghoulisg guessing game: Will President Bush manage to leave office without starting a war with Iran? Mr. Bush is eagerly feeding those anxieties. This month he raised the threat of ‘World War III’ if Iran even figures out how to make a nuclear weapon.

“With a different White House, we might dismiss this as posturing—or bank on sanity to carry the day, or the warnings of exhausted generals or a defense secretary more rational than his predecessor. Not this crowd.”

The implications of this assessment, coming as it does from the America’s newspaper of record, the voice of erstwhile establishment liberalism, deserve the most serious consideration.

Not this crowd. In other words, a remark about World War III from another administration might have been written off, in the words of Senator Boxer, as “irresponsible,” but in the mouths of Bush, Cheney & Co. it becomes a palpable threat.

With the US military already mired in two colonial-style wars with no end in sight, the *Times* indicates that there exist no grounds for believing that the White House will not pursue the seemingly insane course of launching yet a third war, which—far more than those already underway—carries with it the danger of spreading into a global conflagration.

Reflected in the tone of this editorial is a profound political crisis within American ruling circles. Its unstated implication is that US policy is presently determined by a militarist camarilla which is out of control and subject neither to constitutional restraints nor international law.

Such a statement would not appear in the leading US daily paper unless there were deep concerns within the political establishment that America is on the brink of a war that poses catastrophic consequences.

But what the *Times* editorial cannot explain and does not even attempt to elucidate is how *this crowd* has remained in control of the US government going on eight years now, and how the seemingly insane escalation of American militarism has become Washington’s predominant policy on a world scale, supported and funded by both major parties. This cannot be rationalized as the outcome of Bush’s or Cheney’s supposed dementia.

Instead, the editorial makes the following toothless criticism of Bush: “Four years after his pointless invasion of Iraq, President Bush still confuses bullying with grand strategy. He refuses to do the hard work of diplomacy—or even acknowledge the disastrous costs of his actions.”

Since when was the invasion of Iraq “pointless?” The point to attempting to subjugate Iraq

was clear from the outset. As former US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan wrote in his recently published book—describing it as “what everyone knows”—the war against Iraq “is largely about oil.”

That is, behind all of the propaganda lies about weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, the war was launched in pursuit of definite imperialist aims. Washington consciously decided to utilize its military might as a means of offsetting US capitalism’s economic decline relative to its major rivals in Europe and Asia. Placing an American hand on the oil spigots of the Persian Gulf was seen as a means exerting decisive pressure on these rivals and preserving US hegemony in the affairs of world capitalism.

This war was not pointless, it was criminal. To pursue its aims, US imperialism was prepared to unleash destruction on a scale that has now claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis and laid waste to an entire society.

The same “point” lies behind the present escalation of US aggression against Iran, pursued once again in the name of curtailing weapons of mass destruction and combating terrorism. The results of such a new war will prove far bloodier.

The *Times*—as in the run-up to the Iraq war—is once again advocating the use of diplomacy to secure legitimization for the predatory imperialist interests that Washington is pursuing against Iran. Its differences with the Bush administration, like those of the Democrats, are merely of a tactical character.

The supposed insanity of the Bush and Cheney *crowd* is in the end shared, at least in its essential symptoms, by all sections of the American ruling elite. The fundamental source of this malady lies not in the psychology of those presently in the White House—however unstable it may be—but rather in the underlying contradictions of world capitalism, above all the subordination of the powerful forces of globally integrated capitalist production to the private profit interests of the ruling elites of competing national states.

It is these contradictions, which are objectively driving the eruption of American militarism, that threaten a new war against Iran and a broader conflagration, as other major powers are inevitably compelled to defend their own access to strategic energy supplies and markets. Mounting economic instability will only accelerate this process.

The *Times* editorial constitutes a serious warning. A far wider war is now seen within the US ruling elite as a real and imminent danger to which no section of the present political establishment has a viable alternative. Such a war poses the real threat of a nuclear conflagration and the extermination of hundreds of millions.

The decisive question is that class-conscious workers and youth grasp both the immense dangers and the emerging revolutionary possibilities in the present situation. Mankind is threatened with wars that will reproduce and eclipse the catastrophes inflicted by the two world wars of the last century. But this threat is itself a manifestation of the profound crisis of the capitalist system.

Nothing could make clearer the hopelessness and bankruptcy of a perspective of ending the war in Iraq or halting an even bloodier catastrophe in Iran by means of pressuring Congress or supporting the Democratic Party against the Republicans.

A genuine struggle against war must be waged by politically uniting working people worldwide

based on a common socialist and internationalist program aimed at putting an end to economic and political domination of a financial oligarchy that pursues its profit interests by means of military slaughter.

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