

Resist War and Empire by Michael T. Klare

The Nation Feb. 24, 2003

With up to 200,000 American and British combat troops already stationed in or on their way to the Persian Gulf area, war with Iraq looks increasingly imminent. This war can still be stopped, but the antiwar movement should begin planning for what it must do if it is not. The next step is to expand the movement into a permanent opposition to the Administration's imperial design.

The very imminence of war has already galvanized the US peace movement. Hundreds of thousands of Americans from widely diverse backgrounds participated in antiwar rallies in Washington, San Francisco and other cities on January 18, and many lobbied Congress in the days that followed. New groups and coalitions--MoveOn, United for Peace & Justice, Win Without War and others like them--have emerged in recent months to oppose war in Iraq and to organize new peace demonstrations, such as the mass rallies planned for February 15 in New York City and February 16 in San Francisco (for more information, see "No War With Iraq" at www.thenation.com).

The next weeks are crucial. As long as there is any chance of averting war, the antiwar movement must do all it can to increase the odds for peace, through mass protest, petitioning, lobbying, media work and other forms of action. This is essential both on moral grounds, to stress the illegitimacy of pre-emptive military action as a solution to international problems, and on political grounds, to build a nationwide constituency that can oppose the subsequent abuse of military power.

Yet for all our efforts, the likelihood of war with Iraq erupting in the next few weeks remains high. If it comes, war will pose an enormous challenge to the American peace movement. War will mark the beginning of its work, not the end.

The Bush Administration sees the coming conflict as the first step in a much larger campaign aimed at the political and economic transformation of Iraq and the surrounding region under US supervision. US troops are likely to remain in Iraq for a very long time--first to insure the installation and survival of a friendly regime and then to coerce other states in the region into obeying Washington's dictates. They will, in other words, serve as imperial occupiers. This means that the American peace movement must assume a historic role of unprecedented scale and character: It must build the foundation for a long-term campaign against a permanent imperial US presence in the Middle East and the permanent militarization of American society.

As the battle rages, the peace movement must speak out against the use of tactics and weapons by either side that will result in the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. In particular, it must condemn air and missile attacks on populated areas of Baghdad by US forces, and the possible use of chemical and biological weapons by Saddam Hussein in a last-ditch effort to inflict high casualties on the invaders. And it should demand that the United States cooperate with the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other relief agencies to address the humanitarian crisis that war would bring.

Once the fighting is over, another struggle will begin. The peace movement should be prepared to call for the immediate relief of civilians in need; the repair of essential infrastructure (roads, hospitals, power stations and so on); the rapid installation of a representative, democratically inclined Iraqi government; and the speedy replacement of US combat troops by a multinational peacekeeping force. We must not allow the obvious requirement for some sort of security presence in Iraq to be used as the justification for turning Iraq into a permanent US garrison.

Finally, and most important, the peace movement must prepare itself to conduct a long-term struggle against the Administration's imperial designs in the gulf. These plans must be exposed for what they are: a classic appropriation of political power and material goods (especially petroleum) by military force masquerading as a campaign for democracy.

Not that we oppose the spread of genuine democracy, but we must oppose any democratizing project based on US economic interests and sustained by US military power--a project that is certain to provoke anger, resistance and violence around the world, not to mention an increased risk of terrorism at home. Most of all, it is likely to hasten the transformation of this country into an undemocratic, soulless warfare state.

As we move closer to the abyss, we begin to glimpse our historic mission: to envision and promote a peaceful, non-imperial future in which the United States cooperates with other states in constructing robust international institutions capable of resisting aggression, averting global environmental catastrophe and protecting the rights of all.