

# Could the War Go Nuclear?

By Paul Rogers | February 17, 2003

There has been an assumption, based on all the reports of troop movements and President Bush's increasingly insistent tone, that war with Iraq is imminent. However, other sources suggest a postponement, even that the U.S. military may not be ready to start the war until the latter part of March.

What appears to have happened is something like a rerun of the crisis in 1990. Then, there were substantial movements of troops, naval ships, and aircraft into the Gulf within ten weeks of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait at the beginning of August, with the expectation that war was imminent by November. In practice, there was a complete rethinking on the U.S. part, with a near doubling of troop numbers before the war finally started—five months after Kuwait had been occupied.

This time it is more complicated, not least because of the pressure on the United States to take the United Nations (UN) route and allow time for the weapons inspections. But something more than this is going on. The most recent information on troop movements indicates that the U.S. military brass have decided to have large numbers of troops ready to invade Iraq immediately the bombing starts, rather than wait for two or more weeks for the air war to wreck the Iraqi military.

## U.S. Plans, Iraqi Surprises?

There may be two quite separate reasons for this. The first is the expectation that the Iraqi regime will try to use chemical weapons to blunt the force of the attack; one way of countering this would be an immediate and rapid U.S. movement toward Baghdad, while an intensive air war makes it almost impossible for Iraqi elite forces to move their weapons into position.

The second reason is the recognition that the start of any war will signal to the regime that it is about to be terminated. A highly likely response from the Iraqi leadership will be the systematic destruction and firing of the oil fields of southeastern and northern Iraq. While this would not affect the eventual outcome of the war, the Pentagon may well assess the effect of such an evident environmental disaster as

likely to incite widespread criticism of the war. Graphic television pictures of burning oil fields right at the start of the war would not encourage the view that the U.S. military was comfortably in control.

On this basis, a key part of the military plan will therefore be the rapid movement of highly mobile forces into the oil fields to try and take immediate control of them, with substantial fire-fighting teams ready to move in behind them if necessary.

The overall effect of such concerns is that everything that is considered necessary will be fully in place at the start of the war. On present trends, this means sometime between 20-30 March, or possibly even a little later. This is, of course, if things go according to plan. Any kind of Iraqi pre-emption could change this outlook fundamentally, and with the regime now virtually certain that it is about to be terminated, it would be wise to expect surprises.

After the first night of intensive bombing in January 1991, there was widespread expectation that the war would be over almost at once. Then, on the second night, the Scuds began to hit targets in Israel and suddenly everything seemed a lot more complicated.

## Could Nuclear Weapons Be Used?

Meanwhile, the issue of the possible Iraqi use of chemical weapons is once again raising the question of whether nuclear weapons might be used against Iraq. At first sight the very idea seems so unlikely as to be not worth considering, yet three important points arising from recent developments make it necessary for us to do precisely that.

First, Britain's Minister of Defense, Geoff Hoon, has repeated earlier warnings of possible nuclear use. In his appearance on the David Frost Program on BBC



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TV on 2 February, he said: “We have always made it clear that we would reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in conditions of extreme self-defense. Saddam can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use nuclear weapons.”

This could be interpreted simply as a further effort to deter the Iraqis from using chemical or biological weapons, but the second and third points suggest an even more worrying situation. The second point, therefore, is that the United States simply does not know all the sites where Iraq may be hiding any chemical or biological weapons, and many of them may be hidden too deep underground for conventional weapons to destroy. Iraq is already subject to intensive surveillance, and this will be continued at an even higher level once the war starts. Indications of movement of chemical or biological weapons from deeply buried and previously hidden sites may come very suddenly, placing a premium on their immediate destruction.

This brings us to the third point, illustrated in a highly significant article in the *Los Angeles Times* (January 26) by a well-informed defense analyst, William J. Arkin. According to Arkin, planning for the possible use of nuclear weapons against Iraq is actively under way at U.S. Strategic Command in Omaha. Citing “multiple sources close to the process,” Arkin specifies two potential roles for nuclear weapons: attacking Iraqi facilities located so deep underground that they might be impervious to conventional explosives, and thwarting Iraq’s use of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, Arkin cites sources within U.S. Central Command (the military command responsible for a war with Iraq) saying that a Theatre Nuclear Planning Document has already been prepared for Iraq.

Arkin’s article led to inquiries by other journalists seeking clarification from administration sources, but no denials were forthcoming.

## After the Nuclear Threshold

In the ordinary way, Arkin’s article might be dismissed as scaremongering, but his own background suggests otherwise. Bill Arkin has worked as a defense analyst for more than twenty years, and was previously in U.S. Army intelligence. He is coauthor of a

series of the most detailed books on nuclear arsenals published throughout the whole of the cold war era, and has written regularly for the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*. He may be critical of some aspects of military planning and behavior but he is certainly not intrinsically anti-military.

Perhaps most significant of all, in recent years he has tended to take the view that nuclear weapons have lost most of their strategic significance, even to the extent of criticizing those who take a different view. Put bluntly, Arkin would not have written this particular piece unless he was fully sure of his sources and what they were telling him.

The combination of these three elements—statements from people such as Geoff Hoon about a willingness to use nuclear weapons, the evident reality that some key Iraqi targets cannot be destroyed except with nuclear weapons, and William Arkin’s report that planning for such use is now being actively undertaken—is highly significant.

The conclusion is that the Pentagon is apparently in happy concert with Britain’s Ministry of Defense that the use of nuclear weapons may be appropriate in the coming war with Iraq. If the weapons are used, then the nuclear threshold that has held since 1945 will disappear and we will move into an even more dangerous world—as other states scramble to develop their own deterrents in the form of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

Apart from all the other issues involved in the prospective war with Iraq—civilian casualties, regional instability, humanitarian crisis, environmental catastrophe—this alone is sufficient evidence to indicate why a war with Iraq could be so exceptionally dangerous.

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*(This article was first published in its entirety on the global issues website (online at [www.opendemocracy.net](http://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.)*