

Global Journalist: Can the United States avoid war in Iraq?

In this Jan. 23, 2003 episode of Global Journalist, host Stuart Loory and four journalists discuss the possibility of a war between the United States and Iraq. Guests from the US, UK, Israel and Lebanon weigh in on how other countries would react to an attack against Iraq, and discuss the potential consequences of launching such a war.

Host: Stuart Loory

Guests:

[Jay Bushinsky](#)

[Catherine Taylor](#)

[Brian Whitaker](#)

[Helena Cobban](#)

Producer: Sarah Andrea Fajardo

Director: [Pat Akers](#)

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Stuart Loory 00:21

Welcome to Global Journalist on KBIA. This is the program that says mid Missourians -- indeed many Americans -- are interested in international news. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism, coming to you today for the next several months from London where I'm teaching. There appears to be a lot of pressure developing among the allies of the United States to avoid war with Iraq. Only British Prime Minister Tony Blair remains solidly in line with President George W. Bush. Otherwise, the leaders of France and Germany say they think war can be avoided and both could cause trouble in the United Nations Security Council where Germany will hold the presidency next month. And France is threatening a veto of any action that could lead to an immediate war. Iraq's neighbors, Arab or Muslim countries are showing strong signs of resisting and attempt to fight Iraq. Earlier this week, there was an attempt put forth by Arab nations to force Saddam Hussein into exile to avoid war. The Bush administration said it would look favorably on such a solution. But the buildup in the Persian Gulf area continues. Is there any hope of avoiding war? Or will it break out in the next few weeks. To discuss the possibility today, we have in Tel Aviv, Israel, Jay Bushinsky, Bureau Chief for WINS News in New York and a correspondent for The Washington Times, many other radio and print organizations around the world as well. In Beirut, Lebanon Catherine Taylor, a freelance reporter. In London, Brian Whitaker,

Middle East editor for The Guardian newspaper, and in Charlottesville, Virginia, Helena Cobban, a columnist for The Christian Science Monitor and the London based Arabic newspaper, Al-Hayat. Catherine Taylor, let's start with you. From your vantage point in the Muslim world, give us a rundown. How will Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan react to an attack against Iraq?

Catherine Taylor 02:30

Well, I would say that some non-elite leaders would shed very many tears if Saddam Hussein was deposed). You don't have to scratch the surface very hard here to find most people admitting that they don't like him very much at all. But at the same time, you have views from among Arab states that Iraq is just the first act in why US would plan to reshape the region. And Iraq very much buying into that spirit, (unintelligible) envoys around the region to obviously support making that point very strongly. And the second point is that our civilians are asking why a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not top of the American list of priorities. So the perception here seems to be that the US is its weight around, it's acting in its own interest. And this is in turn encouraging radicalism and Arab regimes with (unintelligible) that if they support the US in Iraq, it may create further radicalism among Iraq population.

Stuart Loory 03:30

Jay Bushinsky. What do you think?

Jay Bushinsky 03:33

Well, I think all I can offer is perspective here because Israel officially is declaring that it is not a party to this conflict, does not intend to be, does not want to be, and doesn't have to be. However, the background is very important to put it very briefly. Iraq is the only Arab state which fought a war with Israel, and which never signed a ceasefire or an armistice. Therefore, technically, Iraq and Israel are still at war with one another as they've been since 1948. Iraq fought in the 1973 War alongside the Syrians. In 1981, the Israeli Air Force bombed and destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, thereby pushing the clock back for Saddam Hussein's nuclear preparations. Right now, the Israelis are braced for the possibility of another round of Scud missiles coming in from Iraq, as happened during the 1991 Gulf War, and extensive preparations are being made to safeguard the civilian population against the possibility that this time they may have chemical or biological warheads. So it's being taken very seriously here, but Israel officially is not involved.

Stuart Loory 04:43

Brian Whitaker, the headline in your newspaper this morning or one of the headlines says Shroeder and Chirac want more time for inspectors. The headline in the Times, one of your competitors, says Germany blocks the road to war. Do France and Germany or any of the other NATO allies have any great influence on the United States?

Brian Whitaker 05:09

I think it's a problem if they block an action by NATO. That is, that is certainly something the Americans would have to consider. I think what's interesting is that the number of people in Britain who take a rather similar view of this to the French and the Germans, and we have a prime minister who appears quite enthusiastic to support Mr. Bush. On the other hand, the latest opinion poll this week show that

opposition to war in Britain has been growing, the opposition is now at 47%. Well, support has been declining and he's down to 30 30%. At the same time, even though a number of people support the possibility of war. 81% of the British people said in the poll that they should not be allowed without a clear mandate from the United Nations Security Council?

Stuart Loory 06:05

And is there any chance that because of France and Germany that the Security Council will not give the mandate?

Brian Whitaker 06:15

Well, I mean, the five countries which have the right of veto on the Security Council is the United States, there's Britain, there's France, there's Russia, and there's China. And the positions of France, Russia and China are not very clear at the moment.

Stuart Loory 06:31

But so far, the United States has been-- it has done a good job from its point of view of blocking any real opposition in the security council.

Brian Whitaker 06:41

It has. I mean, it's possible the same thing will happen again. All these countries do have their own private interests as well as issues of principle that they may express in public. The Russians are clearly interested in their economic relations with Iraq in the future and I suspect the French as well. So these people may be open to some persuasion.

Stuart Loory 07:07

Helena Cobban, from the United States' point of view, you're close to Washington, and I'm sure you got a chance to watch, and you're very interested in the Middle East. It appears that the Bush administration is without consideration of other arguments, just marching forward toward the conflict. Is anything having any impact? Is anything likely to change that attitude?

Helena Cobban 07:38

Well, I have argued that there is still time to stop the decision to launch this war. It's the President's decision to make evidently, but meantime, we've had this massive mobilization underway. I think, you know that the the suits in the Pentagon who really wants to push this forward have been making sure that you know, there there has been this mobilization that has been very expensive and will continue to be very expensive to keep those forces in a state of high readiness in the field, deployed so far away as they are from American shores. And I think that they, you know, somebody remarked in the Washington Post today, I guess that the administration has done very well in organizing the, you know, the technical aspects of the mobilization. Has done less well in organizing the domestic and international political aspects of the mobilization, which is to persuade American taxpayers just why this thing is happening, you know, at a time of soaring budget deficits. And they're trying to track out the reasoning now, and of course, we're waiting for the State of the Union address on the 28th of January when the President is going to have to make the case. Today, for example, there's a large article by Condoleezza Rice in the New York Times, in which she seems to be trying to lay out the case. Frankly, I think it's a very poor

case. I mean, I, you know, she just really doesn't make it. And if this is the best the President's people have to offer, then I think they're going to have quite a tough job. We have to note that there was this ABC News, Washington poll -- Washington Post poll earlier this week that showed that 70% of the respondents to that poll amongst the American public wanted more time for the inspections. They're very wary of getting rushed into a war by these arguments, you know, basically, the kind of the cost-related arguments that you have to use this expeditionary force, or else it will become expensive.

Stuart Loory 09:37

You're referring to the same poll that that show President Bush's own public support dropping considerably from what it was before?

Helena Cobban 09:48

Well, that's right. It's dropped to pre September 11, 2001 levels, and people are particularly critical. I mean, the questioning, let's say, is coming not only at the the level of the economy, which is really hurting, you know. I live just a little bit outside the Beltway, I can kind of see what's happening in my state, Virginia, with just terrible budget stuff coming down on top of us. You know, and basically from the federal government, which is not funding what the states need and what the states have have been in dire need of recently. You know, people are critical of that, as well as of the perceived rush towardwar.

Stuart Loory 10:26

The the general feeling in Washington, just based on on people that I talked to in Washington, seems to be that the President has gone so far in the military buildup that he can't really back down now, or I shouldn't say back down, but he can't really change policy, without showing that he has lost face.

Helena Cobban 10:55

Well, you know, I think that's a bit of a false argument. I remember those kind of arguments that the Reagan administration used in 1983 in Lebanon. You know, it's the kind of... if your only argument is credibility, then that is not a strong argument to base, you know, war on.

Stuart Loory 11:12

Let's hear what some other panelists have to say about that. Brian?

Brian Whitaker 11:17

You know, we have a song here about the Grand Old Duke of York, who marched his troops at the top of the hill and then marched them down again and everybody laughed at him. I think the question is whether the troops might return with not in an atmosphere of failure, but having actually achieved something. And there are obviously possibilities that the inspections could, if people were really serious about it, may be made to work and to ensure that Iraq was disarmed. Or if for example, the military pressure led to Saddam Hussein either leaving voluntary or being overthrown by people internally. Both of which would be solution that might induce the American troops to back off.

Stuart Loory 12:05

Jay, I think you wanted to say something.

Jay Bushinsky 12:08

Yes, I just want to say that the very deployment, and the numbers involved is a factor constantly bearing down on Saddam Hussein and his regime. And they may be responsible for the fact that the Iraqis seem to be softening up a little bit in their attitude towards the inspectors and opening up a little bit more, giving way and enabling them to do their job. And if they can accomplish any of these goals without shedding blood, without destruction of targets within Iraq, all the better. I mean, it's happened before. I just want to dispute something that was said by Helena before. In in... back in 1983, when the United States was involved in a peacekeeping effort mainly in Lebanon. And the terrorists, you'll have to excuse the expression but that's what they are, blew up the barracks of the Marines who were assigned to that mission, the United States pulled out. And the USS Missouri, which had been shelling targets deep inside Lebanon, and (unintelligible) ceased its involvement in the war. So the United States can pull back, it has pulled back, and it may pull back. But hopefully it'll pull back after using military force to achieve a diplomatic goal without shedding blood.

Stuart Loory 13:20

So you think that that is a strong possibility?

Jay Bushinsky 13:25

I think that's the ideal option. And I think that it could work. It's worked before, it's question of balance of power. In this case, United States showing what muscle it has, and Iraq is realizing that if this power is unleashed, life in Baghdad will never be the same again.

Stuart Loory 13:44

Okay, we have to take a break now. This is Global Journalist on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory. We'll be right back. Welcome back to Global Journalists. You may listen to this program again, ask questions, or make comments by going to www.globaljournalist.org or in mid-Missouri by calling KBIA at 882-9641. And that is a special number just for Global Journalist. Jay Bushinsky, before the break, you were talking about the possibility that the United States may use military might, maybe doing that now, for diplomatic purposes. What about the possibility that Saddam Hussein can be forced into exile by the neighboring Arab countries?

Jay Bushinsky 14:40

I kind of doubt that I think that Arab honor would make it unseemly for him to turn himself into a forlorn exile. I don't recall any Arab, Arab leaders in exile, except for the late (unintelligible) of Jerusalem, Amin alHusseini. Otherwise Arab leaders seem to hold on. But I'd like to remind you that the United States of America did it. These are the the Soviet Union, we had an enormous build up, we were supported by NATO, where the result of the arms race, et cetera that was brought to bear. I think, unless you disagree, you know, the Soviet Union better than I, resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union. And this could happen to Iraq as well.

Stuart Loory 15:24

There was never, despite the Cold War. And all of the military buildup of the Cold War, except for the Cuban Missile Crisis, there was never really a threat of war between the the two superpowers of the

time. If I can bring Catherine Taylor into this. Catherine, what is your view of whether or not the the Arab states can have any real influence on the outcome and whether anything they can do that can prevent a war?

Catherine Taylor 16:03

Well, I think they've shown that they already do have influence, because the US administration has already referred to this idea of exile and said it's good idea. So in that way, you know, their voice is definitely being heard in Washington. There's two initiatives underway here. The initiative is being debate, debated in Turkey at the moment. There's also a Lebanese initiative which is very similar and is hoping to encourage a rising up against Saddam and an abandonment of support for the Iraqi military. As the campaign progressed, and and the way it was described to me that the deposing of Saddam would be similar to the Department of (unintelligible) regime. But at the same time, you know, I think Arab states realized that this proposal is possibly wishful thinking. You know, Saddam himself has said that he doesn't want to go, that he has the support of his people and that he won't simply step down There's also the question of which countries would be willing to take him knowing that at some stage human rights groups would probably lobby for him to be handed over to a walk crimes trial. So there's there's certainly many questions. But I mean, the idea itself could be a perfect way out for both the Arab states and for the US government. Both of them could save face by by working on this idea, and seeing if some resolution could be drawn from it.

Stuart Loory 17:26

Brian Whitaker, the NATO ambassadors met yesterday. The United States is trying to get NATO to agree to various kinds of military support and the ambassadors reached no decision. Is NATO, NATO which has always been led by the United States. Do you think it will end up in opposition to the United States?

Brian Whitaker 17:57

Well, this is a very interesting issue, which really hasn't cropped up before, because NATO has always made its decisions by consensus as far as I can discover. And it's a rather unprecedented situation that's arisen. It looks as if, if there's a situation where some countries don't want to go along with something, then it will be very difficult for NATO as a whole to do so. Though we're in slightly uncharted territory I think.

Stuart Loory 18:30

It certainly is uncharted and there is a lot of talk now that for various reasons, NATO is an outmoded alliance. And is, is this something that could lead in that direction?

Brian Whitaker 18:48

I think it's it's an interesting question because of the moves to expand NATO, particularly with East European countries and so on. It suggests to me that this may be the the first test of how you actually make decisions in NATO when, when there's a disagreement.

Stuart Loory 19:07

The irony of NATO right now is that the United States may find more support from the Eastern European members of NATO than it finds from the the traditional original members.

Brian Whitaker 19:24

That's quite possible. But I mean, it depends on what the-- where they think their interests lie I think. And certainly, I mean, small countries, looking for some sort of favors from the United States might well be more willing to give their support than the larger ones like France and Germany.

Stuart Loory 19:44

Helena there, there was a lot written several months ago about a lack of agreement within the Bush administration on what to do in Iraq. There were stories about how Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld, for example, were on opposite sides of the question and stories about how the generals themselves did not really want to go to war in the Middle East. You don't see those stories any longer. Has all of the disagreements disappeared?

Helena Cobban 20:21

Well, it's disappeared from public view. And we've seen Colin Powell making some fairly, you know, tough sounding statements recently. And I think we have to remember that he, you know, is by origin and many years of training a military person. And, you know, once the decision has been made by his commander in chief, he's going to most likely be, you know, a loyal soldier. And the same definitely with the serving generals in the administration. Who knows what they're saying to the president in in private, or in, you know, in their quiet consultations. I know that, you know, obviously as Secretary of State, Colin Powell has to have, you know, access to the President. And he has made a real difference on several occasions back in the fall of 2001 when he dissuaded them from going off to Iraq at the same time as Afghanistan. Back in August, when he persuaded the administration that it should go through the United Nations rather than just bypassing the United Nations. So perhaps he's also having, you know, similar kind of influence right now, and we don't, don't hear about it. It seems to me that they, in general, are seem to be saying, you know, all the administration's spokespeople that we hear, what they seem to be saying right now is that they won't consider that a UN Security Council resolution is absolutely necessary as a prerequisite to going to war. To a certain extent, there's a lot of, they're sort of a huge game of chicken going on here. I think that, realistically speaking, nobody wants this war, except perhaps, you know, some extreme right wingers in Israel who have, you know, gone on the record, being very eager for it. But, you know, everybody realizes that war is a very serious undertaking and that, you know, there are real risks to American soldiers, to the American economy, to the, you know, the the idea of an American, pro-American order throughout the Middle East. I mean, it's some of the pro-American rulers there. People who have historically been extremely pro-American, the Jordanian regime, the Saudi regime, the Egyptian regime, who are most terrified of the effect of a war. So, you know, maybe the administration is going up to the brink hoping that it won't happen. But, you know, as we've discussed already, There's, they're kind of, you know, you start to think costs in this, in this venture. And if you go up to the brink, it's hard to step back. It's not impossible. And, you know, we talked a little bit about those credibility issues. There are so many people, however, throughout the world who would be very happy to help George Bush, you know, think through a way to declare victory and step back. And I'm sure, I'm sure, Prime Minister Blair may be in a position like that.

Jay Bushinsky 23:28

I don't know of a single right winger in Israel, of any importance or significance, who's calling for the United States to go to war against Iraq. It would go against the grain of this country to urge another country to shed its blood. Israel defends itself, and I don't know of anybody who has called for war here.

Catherine Taylor 23:43

I found many, many famous, including Prime Minister Sharon in the past, he's been less outspoken recently.

Jay Bushinsky 23:50

They refrain from calling on the United States to do anything. Who is it? What is Israel? And who is Israel to tell the United States what it ought to do? Not at all.

Stuart Loory 24:02

Jay, I know you have to go and we have other things to discuss, but one of the things I wanted to bring up now is the, the economic component of any reason to go to war. The Guardian's lead story today is a story about Iraq's oil fields and the United States beginning secret talks to make sure that the oil fields do not go up in flames, if there is any war. Talk a little bit about the economic impact as far as Israel is concerned.

Jay Bushinsky 24:43

Well, this it's a double double whammy for Israel because economic situation here is very, very bad. Mainly because of the two year long Palestinian Intifada uprising and the fact that tourists are not coming here, investors are not investing. But now the uncertainty of war in the, in the Gulf between the United States and Iraq and the American allies has, has literally paralyzed, traumatized the Israeli economy, and the finance ministers just the other day said that there is light at the end of the tunnel. The tunnel is after the war with Iraq, if there's going to be a war, is over. If there's not going to be a war, everyone will breathe a sigh of relief and start visiting, touring, and investing again.

Stuart Loory 25:25

And Brian, what is this military buildup in the United Kingdom doing to the economy here?

Brian Whitaker 25:35

It's hard to tell at the moment, it's not been going on for very long, and there hasn't really been very much discussion of what it's all costing. I mean, of course, we do have these troops and ships and things maintained anyway. And I mean, I just like to take issue a bit with that argument about the cost of keeping the, the troops in the region because it's clearly more expensive to actually have a war than to not have one, even if you keep the troops there for some time.

Stuart Loory 26:09

Well, you say the buildup, you keep the troops in shape and you you maintain all of the ships and everything. But there still is the additional cost.

Brian Whitaker 26:22

There's an additional cost. But that's not as large a cost as it would be if you're actually firing off missiles and all that sort of thing, where the cost actually becomes phenomenal, because I mean, some of those missiles cost a million dollars a time or something like that. So that there is a there's an issue there, but I don't think it's quite as great as people think. In general, I don't think people are talking about the British economy in decline as a result of this conflict, certainly not at the moment.

Stuart Loory 26:58

Okay, I think we just lost Jay Bushinsky. We have a little less than one minute left. And I would like to hear a very brief assessments from each of you. Brian, you go first. War or no war?

Brian Whitaker 27:14

It's looking very likely at the moment, though I still have a niggling feeling that there might possibly be a miraculous escape.

Stuart Loory 27:25

Catherine Taylor.

Catherine Taylor 27:28

Yeah, I would agree with that. I think all the time that we're heading towards the war. The debate is starting to turn now towards options to avoid war. And so we have to ... (unintelligible)

Stuart Loory 27:40

Helena Cobban.

Helena Cobban 27:41

I think about 70% for a war. I mean, that's the probability. And...

Stuart Loory 27:49

Okay, I'm sorry, we are out of time. Our guests today have been in Charlottesville, Virginia, Helena Cobban. In London, Brian Whitaker. In Beirut, Catherine Taylor and in Tel Aviv, Jay Bushinsky. Our director is Pat Akers, and our producer Sarah Andrea Fajardo. For all, I'm Stuart Loory, Global Journalist will be back next week.