

Iraq: "Stay the Course" or Get Out Now?

The Iraq war has taken the lives of more than 1,500 U.S. troops and up to 100,000 Iraqis. It has cost over \$150 billion - not counting \$82 billion more approved for 2005.

A majority of U.S. people now say invading Iraq was a mistake. *Newsweek* reports that "Every major poll shows an ever-larger majority of Iraqis want the Americans to leave."

So why not get out right now?

Won't a U.S. withdrawal mean violence and civil war?

The U.S. occupation isn't bringing security to Iraq. It is a source of insecurity. U.S. military actions are responsible for most of the Iraqis killed and wounded since the U.S. invasion. The armed insurgency is a direct result of the U.S. presence.

Life in Iraq has become *more violent and difficult*, not less, as the occupation has continued. Ordinary Iraqis - especially women - are afraid to leave their homes. Much of the country remains without safe drinking water or reliable electric power.

Iraqis, like people everywhere, do not want to live under foreign occupation. Yet the Bush administration refuses to commit to any "exit strategy" whatsoever. Instead it is constructing permanent military bases and refuses to say that U.S. troops will *ever* completely withdraw. This is a recipe for never-ending violence, not stability.

The divisions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims and between Arabs and Kurds are not being lessened by military occupation. Leaders in all of these communities condemn sectarian violence and inter-ethnic strife. But they cannot successfully negotiate their differences as long as the U.S. holds ultimate power.



Nameer Nadeem grieves for her brother and nephew as they are buried in a Christian cemetery in Baghdad.

But didn't the Iraqi election mean that the U.S. is bringing democracy to Iraq - and now to the whole Middle East?

At first the Bush administration was *opposed* to holding an election. Only huge protests led by Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani forced the White House to agree to last January's voting. And the majority of votes went to parties calling for an end to the U.S. military presence.

Plus, the new Iraqi government doesn't really hold power in its own country. Laws put in place by former U.S. administrator Paul Bremer are still in force and can't be changed by the new government. U.S. troops - commanded by Washington - do what they please. Iraqis want democracy and self-determination. Neither exists under occupation.

Across the region, Bush claims credit for promoting democracy but deserves none. Threatening sanctions or war against regimes the White House doesn't like - and selling jet

planes to dictators like the one in Pakistan - is bullying, not democracy. Bush is seen throughout the Middle East as hypocritical. He demands that Syria get out of Lebanon while financing Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and Syria's Golan Heights. The White House condemns human rights violations in Iran and but arms the dictatorial monarchy in Saudi Arabia to the hilt.

Still, doesn't the U.S. have an obligation to stay and help the Iraqi people?

The U.S. has both a moral and legal responsibility to help reconstruct Iraq. But continuing military occupation prevents rather than helps fulfill this obligation. Most Iraqis - and most people in the world - believe that George Bush is more interested in controlling Iraqi oil than helping Iraqis. The indefinite presence of U.S. troops reinforces this belief. So does the fact that only a small proportion of the money allotted to reconstruction has been spent - while U.S. companies like Halliburton and Bechtel make millions.

The Iraqi people are capable of rebuilding their country. The U.S. should supply funds, and support international expertise if requested. But control must be in the hands of the Iraqis themselves.

Won't getting out of Iraq bring an increase in terrorism?

The CIA-affiliated National Intelligence Council declares that "Iraq has replaced Afghanistan as the training ground for the next generation of 'professionalized' terrorists." The longer the U.S. occupies Iraq, the more resentment builds against the U.S., increasing the danger of terrorism. The best way to reduce this danger is to get out now.



Kelly Dougherty is a co-founder of Iraq Veterans Against the War. She served in Iraq as a member of the Colorado National Guard and is the daughter of a Vietnam War veteran.

Won't announcing a withdrawal undermine and demoralize U.S. troops?

Attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq average several hundred each week. Frightened young GI's are shooting first, asking questions later. The best way to support the troops is to get them out of a situation where they are killing and being killed for no good reason. Iraq Veterans Against the War says:

"We, the veterans of the war, now know...the reasons for invading the sovereign country of Iraq were false, and we have paid a heavy price for these lies....We call upon our President, the Congress, and all elected officials to immediately and unconditionally withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq and the Middle East."

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