



Washington's Wars and Occupations Month in Review #33

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

January 29, 2008

BIG MUDDY THERE, FANTASY & DENIAL HERE

Across the Middle East Bush's "war on terror" has led to a rolling catastrophe.

The administration is settling in to permanent occupation of Iraq while one-third of Iraqis need humanitarian aid and four million have been forced to flee their homes. Washington sends 3,000 more troops to Afghanistan as civilian deaths from U.S. bombs turn Afghans against the West. Top officials of the U.S.-backed dictatorship in Pakistan admit that their secret service has "lost control" of insurgents it trained and financed. In response to Israel's "collective punishment" residents of Gaza blew up and surged across the Gaza/Egypt border wall in the largest prison break in world history. Arab newspapers – including mouthpieces of pro-U.S. regimes – call Bush's warmongering against Iran "sad and depressing" while Arab governments normalize relations with Tehran.

It's a reprise of Pete Seeger's anthem from Vietnam days: **Washington is knee-deep in the big muddy, and the big fool says to push on.**

But almost none of this registers in mainstream U.S. politics. Occasionally a symptom of these disasters gets newspaper coverage or is mentioned in a TV spot before Britney Spears's latest scandal. But for the most part, the U.S. media operate as if "the surge is a success" or what's happening in Israel-Palestine is a "peace process."

On the electoral front, Republican presidential hopefuls prattle on about "victory" (and Mike Huckabee threatens to stick a pole up the butt of anyone who wants to take down a Confederate flag). The main Democratic hopefuls tone down their criticism of the Iraq disaster for fear of being seen as "weak on national defense." The latest example of this fantasyland dance comes from this week's Republican frontrunner, John McCain. McCain (who wants to stay in Iraq for 1,000 years) proclaimed (Jan. 24) that Hillary Clinton (who wants to stay in Iraq at least through 2012) "has called for surrender and waving the white flag."

It's not new for there to be a disconnect between what's really happening in most of the world and the illusions, denial and elite-driven misinformation that prevails inside this country. But rarely has that gap been as wide – or as dangerous – as it is today.

The challenge before the antiwar movement in 2008 is to narrow that gap.

THE SURGE: "PURE FANTASY"

Veteran military officer Andrew Bacevich (whose son was killed in Iraq) exploded the myth of the surge's "success" in the *Washington Post* Jan. 20:

"As the violence in Baghdad and Anbar province abates, the political and economic dysfunction enveloping Iraq has become all the more apparent... A nation-building project launched in the confident expectation that the U.S. would repeat in Iraq the successes it had achieved in Germany and Japan after 1945 instead compares unfavorably with the response to Hurricane Katrina. Baghdad households receive power an average of six hours fewer a day than under Saddam Hussein. Oil production still has not returned to pre-invasion levels. Reports of widespread fraud, waste and sheer ineptitude in the administration of U.S. aid have become so commonplace that they barely last a news cycle....

"The U.S. is tacitly abandoning its efforts to create a truly functional government in Baghdad. By offering arms and bribes to Sunni insurgents – an initiative that has been far more important to the temporary reduction in the level of violence than the influx of troops – U.S. forces have affirmed the irrelevance of the political apparatus bunkered inside the Green Zone.... First Sgt. Richard Meiers of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division got it exactly right: 'We're paying them not to blow us up. It looks good right now, but what happens when the money stops?'

"The surge has done nothing.... To say that any amount of 'kicking ass' will make Iraq whole once again is pure fantasy. The U.S. dilemma remains unchanged: continue to pour lives and money into Iraq with no end in sight, or cut our losses and deal with the consequences of failure."

Bush is clearly in the no-end-in sight camp. His latest move is to try an end-run around the Senate by calling a proposed treaty for permanent military presence in Iraq a "status of forces" agreement. (*The New York Times* broke the story Jan. 25). A treaty would require the approval of two-thirds of the Senate – which would not be forthcoming – but the administration can negotiate an "agreement" without Senate oversight.

GAZA RESIDENTS SHATTER THE CHARADE

Bush touted last fall's Annapolis conference as promising an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement before the end of his presidency. Failure was apparent within 12 hours of the gathering's end. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced that Israel would not be bound by its deadlines nor would it end construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Bush backed the Israeli right winger to the hilt. Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery's wrote: "Bush told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that the innumerable Israeli roadblocks in the West Bank, which turn the life of the Palestinians into hell, are necessary for the protection of Israel and must remain where they are."

With Washington's support, Israel continued to kill Palestinians as if Annapolis never happened. The squeeze was hardest on Gaza. Forty Palestinians were killed by Israeli attacks in one week alone. The cut-off of food and fuel supplies was leading U.N. officials to predict an imminent humanitarian catastrophe. But Gaza residents found a way to

resist. On January 24 Hamas militants blew up the Rafah Wall separating Gaza and Egypt and thousands of Palestinians poured across the border to buy supplies. *The New York Times* admitted that "the destruction of the fence was an act of defiance by Hamas against Israel, which wants Gaza isolated, and against Egypt, which sealed the border to keep Palestinians out." *The Times* added: "The prospect of an open border with Egypt was widely accepted as a victory for Hamas and another embarrassment for the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, who is seen as a partner with Israel and the U.S. and complicit in the closing of Gaza."

On the ground, Bush's "peace process" does not exist. Middle East expert Joel Beinin, now in Cairo, wrote (Jan. 24):

"Palestine, Israel, and Egypt after the fall of the Gaza wall are more unstable than before. It is desirable, but alas unlikely, that this instability will bring the leaderships to their senses.... But it is more likely that Olmert, Abbas, and Mubarak – all weak and discredited leaders – will seek to hold onto power by clinging to the U.S..... The people of the Gaza Strip have taken their survival into their own hands and have shown that the power of ordinary people is more likely to shape the future than polished diplomatic formulas."

AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN, IRAN

In Afghanistan, Washington's war is being lost and NATO is divided about what to do. Syed Saleem Shahzad, Pakistan Bureau Chief of *Asia Times Online*, explained:

"NATO is divided on the strategic question in Afghanistan. The British... think that the last five, six years' policies, which were essentially run by the U.S., were a failure. They want to revamp the whole strategy. They want to play a game of carrot-and-stick with the Taliban. But the Americans are not agreeing with this whole idea, they believe that it would fall flat on their face.... Afghans, like all folks in the world, want prosperity. And development works. And if they would feel that Americans or the foreign forces mean it, they would certainly support it. At present they don't feel it; they just view them as foreign occupation forces which did not deliver anything... these are the same people who actually booted out the Taliban."

As for Pakistan, Washington is so worried about the rising influence of anti-U.S. militants that it has floated the idea of conducting operations inside the country with U.S. troops. The trial balloon has so outraged Pakistani society that even Washington's client/military dictator Pervez Musharraf had to declare that U.S. troops "would be regarded as invaders" if they did so! Bush's entire strategy in this large, strategic and nuclear-armed state has come apart: Plan A (backing Musharraf) is in terminal crisis. Plan B (brokering a deal between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto) ended with Bhutto's assassination. Plan C is simply the same recipe that is failing everywhere: send U.S. troops.

To salvage all this wreckage, Bush is counting on drumming up war-fever against Iran. It's blowing back right in his face.

First Washington tried to manufacture an "Iranian-naval-boats-threaten-U.S.-ships" incident to build up war hysteria. The White House version of the Jan. 10 events was discredited within days, with evidence that Washington altered the tapes that supposedly "proved" Iranian aggression. It's noteworthy that many U.S. military officers on the spot

gave interviews which – without explicitly saying so – essentially undermined Bush's claims.

Then, in an even bigger embarrassment, Bush's trip to the Middle East – basically an anti-Iran junket – fell flat. Longtime analyst Aijaz Ahmad explains:

“Bush wanted to bring together all the Arab states, or virtually all of them... to build some kind of coalition against Iran. The Arab states are not at all convinced that there is a very serious Iranian problem, which needs to be addressed in military terms. So they started building bridges towards Iran. A number of states – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and now even Egypt – are normalizing relations with Iran. Essentially, Bush is a lame duck president, and in fact the initiative is with Iran.”

And here at home the General Accounting Office blew a raspberry in Bush's face. It issued a new report adding to the embarrassment of last year's National Intelligence Report saying Iran had no nuclear weapons program. The report said that the international effort to pressure Iran is faltering and questioned whether the last 20 years of U.S. economic sanctions has had any impact!

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND GLOBAL WARMING

The severity of all these problems is barely hinted at most U.S. media. Newspapers, television and magazines have done somewhat better lately highlighting two other rolling catastrophes: the economic crisis and global warming. But there are huge gaps here too, not least the near-total silence regarding the many connections – via militarism, oil, and spending priorities – between both of these crises and Washington's policies in the Middle East.

These gaps can be closed. Much of the public is ready to hear ideas about alternative foreign policy directions if these are presented in language and style that they can take in. The latest polls show 75% of the population think the country is “on the wrong track.” Despite all the “surge-is-succeeding” hype nearly 60% think the war in Iraq is going badly and the same percentage think it was a mistake for the U.S. to invade in the first place. “Change” is the mantra of the campaign season.

But who will define what “change” means and what kind of “changes” will work? Only if this country turns from the path of wars and occupations to negotiation, international cooperation and respect for self-determination can the catastrophe in the Middle East – as well as other global and domestic problems – be tackled effectively. We in the antiwar movement have to strain every nerve to catapult that message into the center of nationwide debate.

War Times/Tiempo de Guerras is a fiscally sponsored project of the Center for Third World Organizing. Donations to War Times are tax-deductible; you can donate on-line at www.war-times.org or send a check to War Times/Tiempo de Guerras, c/o P.O. Box 99096, Emeryville, CA 94662.