



## ***Washington's Wars and Occupations*** **Month in Review #39**

*by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras*

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### **REALITY BITES. BUSH BLINKS. TOUGH ROAD AHEAD.**

This month the Bush administration finally blinked.

After years of bluster about “staying the course” and “not rewarding evildoers by talking to them,” a shift in White House declarations indicated that failure is forcing even this President to adjust.

First, about Iraq:

Three months ago Bush was promising an imminent “Status of Forces Agreement” that would grant the U.S. long-term bases, provide immunity from Iraqi law for U.S. troops and military contractors, and allow U.S. commanders to launch operations and arrest Iraqis at will. This month the White House has retreated to talk about an interim, one-year “understanding” with no promise of bases, no immunity for contractors, and possibly limits on the U.S. military’s right to act unilaterally. And with the Iraqi Prime Minister saying that Iraqis want a timetable for U.S. withdrawal, Bush was even forced to say he accepted a “time horizon” for getting out. Such language was previously banned from the Neocon dictionary.

Next, Iran:

Ever since he included Tehran in his “axis of evil,” Bush had insisted that there would be no direct contact until Iran first agreed to Washington’s demands. This month came the flip-flop. The President sent top-ranking diplomat William Burns to sit in on talks between European and Iranian negotiators.

A front-page assessment in *The New York Times* (July 16) drew the direct link between these shifts and six years of failure: “The U.S., Israel and some of their European allies have begun to recognize that their policy of trying to defeat their enemies by isolating and vilifying them has failed.” (The so-called newspaper of record might have added: shooting, bombing and torturing them has failed too.)

The admission that Washington could no longer carry through on White House threats also came from the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen: “Opening up a third front right now would be extremely stressful for us,” he told a reporter, referring to the prospect of a direct clash with Iran. “This is a very unstable part of the world, and I don’t need it to be more unstable.”

From an antiwar vantage point, Immanuel Wallerstein laid out the overall picture: "We've moved into a truly multipolar world where the power of relatively weaker states is suddenly much greater. The Middle East this year is but one example: Turkey brokers long dormant negotiations between Syria and Israel. Qatar brokered a negotiated truce between fiercely opposed factions in Lebanon. Egypt seeks to broker negotiations between Hamas and Israel. The Palestinian Authority has resumed negotiations with Hamas. And the Pakistani government has entered into a de facto truce with the Taliban inside the zones bordering Afghanistan. What's significant about each of these actions is that the U.S. opposed all of these negotiations and has simply been ignored – without serious consequences for any of the actors."

### **UNDERMINING "STAY 100 YEARS" & "BOMB, BOMB, BOMB," BUT...**

These White House adjustments undermine central aspects of the recent Neocon message. On Iraq, it's been John McCain's shrug-of-the-shoulders declaration: "Who cares if we stay in Iraq 100 years if that's what it takes for 'victory'?" Regarding Iran, it's the Republican nominee's so-called joke about dealing with Tehran using Beach Boys lyrics as a guide: "Bomb, Bomb, Bomb/Bomb, Bomb Iran."

No wonder hard-line Neocon and former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton is furious with the administration. For once Bolton gets things right when he says that the latest White House moves are proof of the administration's "complete intellectual collapse."

But intellectual collapse is not the same as political collapse. The Neocon project is scrambling and on the defensive, but they haven't given up. Bush still hopes to lock in permanent occupation of Iraq. The White House still is attempting to bring about regime change in Iran. And some administration figures (as well as their close allies in the Israeli leadership) still are considering a military attack.

Since Bush is still the Commander-in-Chief, great dangers remain. But the last month's backtracking puts the Neocon project in its weakest position since before 9/11. The White House's concessions have emboldened all forces abroad who oppose U.S. aggression in the Middle East. They've provided new room for initiative by Washington's European allies who want to use diplomacy rather than military force to advance their interests. They've boosted the confidence of China, Russia and other rising economic powers that want to check U.S. influence in the Middle East and generally push the U.S. off its perch as the world's number one bully. And they've compromised some of the worst fear-mongering tactics used by the Neocons at home, thus making the conservative bloc vulnerable (not least in the upcoming elections) to further divisions, disarray and defeat.

### **REALISTS MUST BE PUSHED**

As a result, initiative in the intra-elite debate over Middle East policy is passing from the Neocons to the "realists." This faction of Washington heavyweights believes Bush's policies have been disastrous for U.S. interests. They want to foreground diplomacy and "soft power" and rebuild tattered alliances via multilateral cooperation instead of unilateral dictate. And they want to "cool things down" rather than further destabilize the Middle East, which they realize requires at least a partial withdrawal from Iraq. The candidacy of Barack Obama has become the immediate rallying point for these "realists" (as it has for a wide range of social forces who believe the only way to advance their interests is to break the Right's grip on executive power).

The pendulum swing away from Neocon “all war, all the time” bellicosity marks an important and extremely welcome shift in U.S. politics. The next six months will be crucial in determining whether or not that shift is accelerated and the Neocons further removed from positions of power. Yet from an antiwar point of view, that is only one step, if a big one, on a long, hard road.

Withdrawing combat brigades from Iraq is a step in the right direction. But until all U.S. troops and contractor/mercenaries are gone, Iraq will remain an occupied country and the danger of re-escalation will be constant. Talking to Iran is qualitatively better than not talking. But until Washington renounces the “right” to regime change and faces the facts about nuclear proliferation (Israel has 200-plus nuclear weapons; U.S. intelligence agencies agree Iran has no nuclear weapons program) talks will not lead to normalization and peace.

And that’s just Iraq and Iran. Obama has recently talked about sending more troops to Afghanistan. That’s a recipe for endless bloodshed in a country whose inhabitants have fought against any foreign troops on their soil for centuries. Even before former top counter-narcotics official Thomas Schweich went public about “how deeply the Afghan government was involved in protecting the opium trade” (see “Is Afghanistan a Narco-State?” in *The New York Times*, July 27), a few sensible realists were warning about the dangers of escalating U.S. troop presence there. Obama-backer Zbigniew Brzezinski – who boasted of his role in luring the Soviet Union to intervene in Afghanistan – warned July 20 that “We are running the risk of repeating the mistake the Soviet Union made... we run the risk that our military presence... will gradually turn the Afghan population entirely against us.”

Meanwhile, there is as yet no indication that a new realist-dominated administration will take the steps necessary toward resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict in anything remotely approaching a just way. Israel’s occupation of Palestine remains at the pivot of tension between the U.S. and the Arab and Muslim world. Yet Israel’s separation wall, the chokehold on Gaza, and continued settlement-building is making Palestinian life more difficult than ever. (See Phyllis Bennis’s “Letter from Abu Dis” at [www.thenation.com/doc/20080804/bennis](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080804/bennis)). Yet the main emphasis of all power-wielders in Washington remains “guaranteeing Israel’s security” rather than ending the subsidy of \$3 billion per year for illegal occupation.

### **A LONG WAY FROM BUSH TRIUMPHANT; A LONG WAY TO GO**

The good news is that with Bush blinking – essentially an admission that U.S. policies the last few years have failed – new space is open for public debate on all these issues. We are a long way from Bush’s aircraft-carrier grandstanding, when debate could be rapidly shut down simply by a presidential warning about “terrorism” or declaration of “Mission Accomplished.” At that time the debate was over the timing of the next “regime change” and whether the U.S. would first target Damascus or Tehran. Imperial failure – combined with the day-in and day-out work of antiwar activists – has changed the terms.

Of course, elite realists will try to keep all public debate within narrow bounds. “Yes, those evil Neocons made terrible blunders but it’s beyond the pale to challenge the dogma that the U.S. is by nature a ‘force for good’ or insist that Washington’s goals in the Middle East have something to do with oil.” Much of the media will collaborate. But a door has been cracked. The antiwar movement faces the challenge of pushing it wide open and spreading our message against war, torture, occupation and racism far and wide.

The terms have changed for practical struggles too. Victories can be and are being won. For an inspiring example, see Mark Weisbrot's "Anti-War Movement Successfully Pushes Back Against Military Confrontation With Iran" here: [www.alternet.org/audits/92395](http://www.alternet.org/audits/92395).

Our side had a pretty good month. But it will take a lot more than forcing Bush to blink to get the U.S. to withdraw totally from Iraq, normalize relations with Iran, and get real about what would bring peace to Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine.

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