

Washington's Wars and Occupations: Monthly Review of Some Key Events & Trends #1

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Informal notes prepared for the War Times/Tiempo de Guerras staff by Max Elbaum.

BUSH BARRELS AHEAD

The Bush administration continues to press its reactionary agenda on every front. It is shameless in thumbing its nose at worldwide opposition. When caught in blatant lies it doesn't even blink. And when faced with embarrassing policy failures and stubborn resistance (as in Iraq) it just barrels ahead. In Bush's second term the neo-conservative, racist war hawks have an even tighter grip on policy than they did before. Some specifics:

- Nominating U.N.-hater John Bolton to be U.N. Ambassador was a calculated way of saying "Screw You" to the world. Sticking with Bolton after all the revelations about his behavior (which have even led some Republicans to protest) underlines the message.
- Torturing prisoners has been reaffirmed as official policy. When asked about torture at his recent press conference Bush said: "We operate within the law and we send people to countries where they say they're not going to torture the people." Even pro-war conservative Andrew Sullivan pointed out what this really means: "I don't think even the president can disguise the fact that he knows this formulation is, in fact, an admission of the use of torture under the guise of a denial... When the president's only criterion for sending suspects to foreign prisons is that the regimes merely "say" they don't torture, and when no one doubts that torture is indeed used, isn't the president essentially saying: "Yes, we do use torture. You wanna make something of it?" To underline the point, a few low-level soldiers go to jail for Abu Ghraib but all the top generals are cleared - and the author of the "torture-is-okay" legal memo is appointed Attorney General.
- At the international talks on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty, countries without nuclear weapons (supported by China and, in part, Russia) are demanding legal assurances that nuclear powers will not use nukes against non-nuclear countries. The U.S. refuses, insisting that Washington will retain the right to use nuclear weapons whenever and against whomever it wants.
- Bush's starve-social-programs/feed-the-military budget is more blatant than ever. **BY 2006, THE U.S. MILITARY BUDGET WILL EQUAL THAT OF ALL THE REST OF THE WORLD COMBINED.**

IRAQ: VIOLENCE INTENSIFIES

In Iraq, violence is intensifying. Conditions of day-to day life are as bad or worse than ever. The new government and the society generally is wracked by ever greater sectarian divisions. Washington still proclaims that it has a "winning strategy" not an "exit strategy" while putting everything in place for permanent military occupation. The January elections were supposed to be a "turning point" and bring stability. Instead, the situation is as volatile as ever and the majority of the population continues to oppose the U.S. occupation. Observers across the political spectrum increasingly worry in public about full-scale civil or even regional war. Some specifics:

- Insurgent attacks are averaging 70 a day. In the five days from April 30 through May 4, the “official” casualty toll showed: Civilians: 88 killed, 344 wounded; Multi-National Forces: 9 Killed, 14 wounded; Iraqi Security Forces: 27 Killed, 64 wounded; Misc. 4 killed, 2 wounded; Armed Opposition Groups: 25 killed, 2 wounded; Foreign Workers: 1 killed. These totals underestimate civilian casualties. And since May 4, violence has escalated dramatically. Also of note: the number of prisoners held in U.S. military detention centers in Iraq has risen without interruption since autumn, it is now 11,350, a nearly 20 percent jump since Iraq’s January 30 elections.
- A new U.N. survey reports “85 percent of Iraqis complain of frequent power outages, only 54 percent have access to clean water and almost a quarter of Iraqi children suffer from chronic malnutrition.” And in one (of many) scandals, last week government investigators said U.S. civilian authorities in Iraq cannot properly account for nearly \$100 million promised for reconstruction projects in south-central Iraq.
- It took months after the election for a new government to be formed. Even now many posts are only filled by “interim ministers.” And there are bitter divisions among those in the government. The Shiite-led alliance which won the election was not the U.S. choice (Iyad Allawi was Bush’s man). Relations between Shiite leaders and Washington are strained. The Shiites want to purge former Baathists, mostly Sunnis, from key posts based on their past history of persecuting Shiites under Saddam Hussein. Many Sunnis see this as an effort to cut all Sunnis out of any share of power. There are growing tensions between Kurds and other Iraqis and between religious and secular-oriented Iraqis. Militias under the direct control of different parties/individuals (not the government overall) have become key forces in the “counter-insurgency.” They commit many human rights violations, and who they will (or won’t) fight against in the future is unpredictable.
- Every poll of Iraqi opinion shows substantial majority opposition to the U.S. military presence. Spontaneous protests against the U.S. (even by Iraqi police), as well as organized demonstrations and public statements by parties and individuals are commonplace. But they are rarely reported in the U.S. press. There is no single coalition or united front or umbrella that unites those opposed to the U.S. occupation across their many divisions (including the divisions between armed and unarmed resistance). Some leftists outside Iraq saw signs of such a coalition forming a year or more ago. But today no one seems to think this is on the horizon.

PROTESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan - which Bush claims as a big success of his “war on terrorism” - anti-U.S. protests have erupted across the country in recent days. They were sparked by reports, most recently in the May 9 issue of Newsweek, that U.S. officers had desecrated the Koran during interrogations at Guantanamo Bay. Protests had spread to 10 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces and into Pakistan by May 12. Several people were killed in clashes with police who were firing on the protesters.

ISRAEL’S LAND GRAB “SOLUTION”

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is pressing ahead with efforts to unilaterally impose a land-grab “solution” on the Palestinians. The goal is to annex East Jerusalem and big chunks of the occupied West Bank while leaving a shrunken, divided portion of the West Bank and Gaza to a Bantustan-like Palestinian State. Sharon is trying to seize what he regards as a unique window of opportunity: Yasir Arafat’s recent death, 100% support from the Bush administration, a passive world community, and Palestinian fatigue and internal divisions. Sharon cannot succeed in the long run. But the current balance

of forces means he might well make some short term gains. And no matter what, the Israeli offensive is going to increase misery among the Palestinian people.

“WE-CAN-HAVE-NUKES-BUT-YOU-CAN’T”

Bush’s “we-can-have-nukes-but-you-can’t” policies are also stoking crises in relation to North Korea and Iran. Both countries were targeted by Bush as part of his “axis of evil.” Washington refuses to rule out a military strike against either country. So even many pro-U.S. analysts have said they understand why both countries might be eager to get nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

On-again, off-again diplomatic processes are underway to try to defuse both crises. These are the so-called six-party talks regarding U.S.-North Korea, and a European-led diplomatic effort in regard to Iran’s nuclear program. The U.S. has been courting China to try to pressure North Korea, but a top Chinese official (in a very unusual public statement) just blamed U.S. stubbornness as the reason diplomacy has not worked. Negotiations between the Europeans and Iran could collapse at any time. And the Bush administration says they don’t have confidence even in successful negotiations.

In fact, many reporters have asserted that “moves toward a U.S. attack on Iran have already begun. Details emerged first in an article by award-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh for the New Yorker... Unmanned surveillance drones have been entering Iranian air-space to search for nuclear facilities and test air-defenses since at least late December 2004, as have US Special Forces. Both The Times in London and the Jerusalem Post have reported that either the U.S., Israel in coordination with the White House, or both governments are planning air attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities as early as June 2005. It is often argued that the US infantry is too stretched by its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan for a new occupation to be contemplated - but in any case a ground invasion is not on the agenda. Instead the right-wing hardliners in the US and Israeli governments imagine that a massive air assault on Iran will precipitate regime change from within.” (Dave Wearing)

UPSURGE ACROSS LATIN AMERICA

Latin America is the region of the world with the strongest left-leaning popular movements right now. The Bush administration is working overtime trying to beat back, undermine or overthrow the region’s progressive movements and governments. But so far Washington is having lots of trouble. Analyst Tom Engelhardt writes:

“It’s remarkable what the Bush administration can’t do today in its own backyard. It can’t fully isolate Cuba; it can’t create a regional ‘coalition of the willing’ against Venezuela; it can’t simply impose its version of economics on the continent; it can’t stop a number of countries in the region from making energy deals of one sort or another with China, Iran, India, and other potential energy competitors. (And if, for a moment, you were to glance north, rather than south, you might notice that it was recently unable to impose its pet boondoggle, the Star Wars anti-missile system, on Canada.)” Add to this the million-strong May Day demonstration in Mexico City which blocked the government’s effort to disqualify popular Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador from next year’s presidential race. Lopez Obrador is now the favorite in that race, and a victory would open up huge new possibilities for Latin America’s progressive upsurge.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR WAR POLICIES FALLS

Support for Bush's war policies among the U.S. people is slipping. Much of the opposition is passive. It is not at this time translating into large-scale support for grassroots antiwar campaigns. But there are many openings for the antiwar movement and potential for growth:

- An early May poll showed support for Bush's decision to attack Iraq is at its lowest level since the invasion: 41% now say the war was worth it; 57% say it wasn't. This is a drop from the weeks after the Iraqi election January 30, when 48% said the war had been worth waging, while 50% said it had not been. Public support had peaked as Saddam Hussein's regime fell in 2003 when 76% of those polled said the war was worth it.
- There is a drastic decline in the number of people enlisting in the military. Reports of military recruiters' using unethical methods have become so widespread the military has been forced to take one day off from recruiting to "re-train" all its recruiters. And though Bush denies it, a recent high-level military report says lack of troops has negative consequences regarding the military's capacity to fight if needed outside Iraq and Afghanistan. Here's how a May 13 USA Today story described things:

"In 2006, the Army's stockpile of recruits is projected to drop from 18%, or 14,400 soldiers, of the recruiting target of 80,000 to just under 10%, or slightly less than 8,000, the head of army recruitment said. The Army usually aims at beginning a new recruiting year with 25-35% of its goal signed up in advance; More than halfway through its fiscal year, the Army has not been able to make a noticeable dent in the public's reluctance to enlist its sons and daughters. That's despite record-high bonuses paid to recruits, a new advertising campaign that targets parents and a dramatic increase in the number of recruiters throughout the nation."

- Last, a new "smoking gun" memo that proves Bush manipulated intelligence to suit his invade-Iraq policy might be starting to get press in the U.S. A top secret British memo dated 23 July 2002 was leaked in the run-up to the British election. It summarizes a report to Prime Minister Tony Blair and others in the British government by Brian Dearlove, head of British Intelligence. The "smoking gun" sentences are: "C [Dearlove] reported on his recent talks in Washington. There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." The L.A. Times and other papers are starting to cover the story, it is unclear what impact, if any, this may have.