



Washington's Wars and Occupations **Month in Review #27**

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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"WHAT IRAQ PROBLEM? WE'RE BEING STABBED IN THE BACK!"

Even conservative Republican columnist George Will is disgusted with the demagoguery coming from Bush and the extreme right. Speaking to another pundit on TV July 15, Will said:

"We are in danger of having a Weimar [Germany before the rise of Hitler] moment in our politics. German politics was embittered disastrously by the belief that they were on the cusp of victory in 1918 and were stabbed in the back by the civilian leadership that didn't understand Germany's military prowess. There is a constituency in this town that believes we're winning in Iraq, that we have at last figured it out, that the indices of success are there. And if we pull out and have disastrous consequences we're going to have those people saying 'We had it won and threw it away.'"

Stab-in-the-back fear-mongering is one of the few remaining arguments available to the "stay-in-Iraq-forever" crowd. They also are reduced to claims that the occupation of Iraq is really a confrontation with Al-Qaeda: "if we leave there, next week we'll have to fight them here."

IT'S FANTASYLAND

When a George Will won't go along with this nonsense you know it's far removed from reality (not to mention morality). In the last ten days alone a host of news reports (some front-page in the mainstream press) refute these big lies:

- Official Defense Department statistics show that insurgent attacks in June – despite the 'surge' – were higher than ever before, averaging 177.8 per day. Most were attacks on U.S. troops, the second highest number were on Iraqi troops or police. The smallest number was on Iraqi civilians, though these are often the most spectacular and deadly. Further, only a small number of attacks (mostly on civilians) are by al-Qaeda-linked groups. Only a tiny fraction of insurgents are affiliated with the organization that Bush claims is doing most of the fighting.

- The latest National Intelligence Estimate punched a big hole in Bush's claims that the war in Iraq is a plus in defeating global terrorism. A front-page *New York Times* story (July 17) put it this way: "In many respects, the National Intelligence Estimate suggests, the threat of terrorist violence against the U.S. is growing worse, fueled by the Iraq war and spreading Islamic extremism....the stark declassified summary contrasted sharply with the more positive emphasis of President Bush and his top aides for years: that two-thirds of al-Qaeda's leadership had been killed or captured; that the Iraq invasion would reduce the terrorist menace."
- The latest plan from General David Petraeus, U.S. commander in Iraq, tosses away all earlier administration claims about a temporary "surge" of U.S. troops translating into victory. The so-called "Joint Campaign Plan" moves the goalposts further back than ever: at best it seeks "local security" in Iraq by summer 2008 and so-called "sustainable security" in summer 2009, while making no promises that U.S. troop levels would diminish. And this is the most optimistic scenario – from Bush's favorite general!
- A blockbuster report in *The Nation*, based on in-depth interviews with 50 Iraq combat veterans, provided detailed confirmation of the horrors rarely covered by even the most anti-Bush mainstream media: "disturbing patterns of behavior by U.S. troops... Iraqi civilians, including children, dying from U.S. firepower... indiscriminate killings... common, often unreported and almost always unpunished." The U.S. military is not liberating or protecting Iraqis: like every colonial occupation force in history, it is (with some honorable exceptions) brutalizing and terrorizing the civilian population. For the full *Nation* piece go to www.thenation.com/doc/20070730/hedges.

POPULAR DISCONTENT

Bush & Company's stabbed-in-the-back bluster runs up against mass discontent with the war as well. The latest polls show a majority think Bush has messed up in Iraq and believe the invasion was mistaken in the first place. Of crucial importance, opposition is rising steadily among military families and within the military itself: of people who said they had served or had a close friend or relative who served in Iraq, only 38% now approve of Bush's Iraq policy. Military Families Speak Out (MFSO), the organization of military families opposed to the war, reports its own surge in membership: almost 20 new families are joining EACH DAY.

Key Republicans are also blaming Bush, not his opponents, for the Iraq disaster. On July 14 the Pittsburgh newspaper owned by conservative billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife (who has financed vicious attacks on antiwar figures and Democrats in the past) called plans to stay the course in Iraq a "prescription for American suicide." The paper's editorial added: "Quite frankly, during last Thursday's news conference, when George Bush started blathering about 'sometimes the decisions you make and the consequences don't enable you to be loved,' we had to question his mental stability."

Such factors indicate important positive shifts in the U.S. political climate in the last year. They highlight the difficulties the right wing has in shifting blame onto others for Washington's Iraq debacle.

RACISM AND "THE TORTURABLE CLASS"

Still, it would be dangerous to underestimate the potential clout of the right-wing message. It taps into major components of both elite and popular anxieties.

For instance, most of the U.S. "establishment" – led by the Washington insiders who authored "Baker-Hamilton" – now admits the Iraq war is lost. They are desperately seeking some form of "damage control." But most remain terrified of the long-term blow to imperial interests should the U.S. totally withdraw. The "stab-in-the-back" charge only terrifies them further. And it contributes to the pattern of cover-your-butt militarism coming even from those who have grudgingly moved to a "we-have-to-leave-Iraq" position: hence the proliferation of statements – especially from leading Democrats – that getting out of Iraq will help the U.S. "get tough" with Iran.

Anti-Iraq war sentiments in the population at large have other vulnerabilities. For large numbers, opposition to the war is based on the fact that the U.S. is losing, not on the immoral nature of the invasion itself or understanding that Iraqis are the war's main victims. It is useful here to note some differences between today and the Vietnam War era. During the 1960s, left-led emancipatory movements held great initiative across the globe and the Black freedom movement surged at home, making radical perspectives a huge pole of attraction for anyone beginning to question the Vietnam War or other U.S. actions. So as the anti-Vietnam War movement expanded, there was a big pull on very large sections of people toward anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and left perspectives.

The situation is much different today. The main forces squaring off against U.S. intervention in the Middle East are not leftists with a progressive social-economic program. Terrorism and ethnic/religious sectarianism are all too real, even if the Bushies exaggerate and exploit them. Movements within the U.S. – the Black freedom movement not least – are still reeling from 30 years right-wing rollback. All this diminishes the attractive force of radical and anti-racist perspectives. As a result, despite the hard work of antiwar and left activists, discontent with the war among millions is less influenced by a general critique of U.S. foreign policy. So it is harder to move large numbers from passivity into mass action, or to prevent vacillation on the urgency of "U.S. Out Now."

The racism and racial blindspots that afflict large swaths of the U.S. population also shape the current moment. Years of demonizing Arabs and Muslims have deeply impacted public consciousness. The constant pundit and media that "they" are out to get "us" (with their racially coded meanings of "them" and "us") skew the entire national conversation not just about Iraq or the "war on terror" but about immigration/immigrant rights, civil rights/arbitrary executive power, and interrogation techniques/torture. Much of the public is willing to accept elements of Bush's program (even if they are angry at administration lies and incompetence) as long as the bodies on Iraq's battlefields or in Guantánamo torture chambers are Arab or Muslim. For too many U.S. people Iraqis and "enemy combatants" are "not like us" and instead part of "the torturable class" (to borrow a phrase from Graham Greene's biting satire on Western spy agencies and colonialism, *Our Man in Havana*).

COMPLICATED MONTHS AHEAD

All this puts complicated challenges in front of the antiwar movement. The Iraq occupation remains the empire's most vulnerable point. Amassing enough pressure to force the U.S. out is the only way to give the Iraqi people a chance to create a decent future out of the current horror. Defeating Washington in Iraq is of direct benefit to people struggling for justice from Bolivia and Venezuela to New Orleans. Though it will lead to even louder stab-in-the-back charges from the pro-warriors, getting the U.S. out will be a major blow to the right's strength and self-confidence.

This means that building the broadest possible opposition to the Iraq occupation stands at the pivot of antiwar efforts. Outreach into the mainstream, mobilization of all who can be convinced to protest in any way, cooperation with groups and individuals way beyond the existing left/progressive ranks – all these are indispensable. Important initiatives for fall 2007 work in those directions are already underway: check out the Iraq Moratorium – www.iraqmoratorium.org – and comprehensive plans for local and regional protests initiated by United for Peace and Justice – www.unitedforpeace.org.

At the same time, efforts to widen the base for anti-racist, anti-empire politics are needed to strengthen the mix. Regarding the Middle East, this especially means education around the Israel-Palestine conflict and the terrible U.S. role. For an assessment of Bush's latest so-called peace plan, see Phyllis Bennis' new article at www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=22&ItemID=13369.

We are also mandated to weave anti-racist education and action into all arenas of work. Racist structures and racist justifications are woven into Washington's policies from war, threatening war (Iran) and backing illegal occupation (Israel/Palestine), to "protecting our borders," "cutting back wasteful spending" and "fighting crime and promoting family values." Those who believe that "an injury to one is an injury to all," need to face this – and combat it – head on.

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