

SEP presidential candidate: “Pull all US troops out of Iraq now”

By Bill Van Auken
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With the bloody fighting that has erupted throughout Iraq over the past week, the last of the pretexts advanced by the Bush administration for sending tens of thousands of US soldiers to invade and occupy Iraq has been shattered.

After its lies about weapons of mass destruction and the alleged terrorist ties of the Saddam Hussein regime were exposed, the White House tried to sell its war as a mission to democratize Iraq. But the events of the past week have made clear that the US occupation is itself the most grievous affront to the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people, and they are prepared to die fighting to end it.

It is high time to bring home every single US soldier deployed in that war-ravaged country. Every day that they remain in Iraq will mean more and more young men and women coming back to the US in coffins, or having suffered injuries, both physical and mental, that will cripple them for life. Every day that they participate in a brutal colonial occupation will only fuel the anger and hatred of the Iraqi people, and the peoples of entire Muslim world.

After the Iraqis—who count their losses of men, women and children in the tens of thousands—the greatest victims of this occupation are the US soldiers themselves. As of Friday, at least 650 GIs—most in their 20s, some in their teens—had died in Iraq. Thousands more have been wounded, many suffering amputations and severe head wounds.

In the last week alone, nearly 50 soldiers and Marines have died battling an insurgency that clearly enjoys mass support and has united Sunnis and Shiites against the occupation. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of mothers, fathers, wives and children of US soldiers live in dread that they will hear the knock on the door by a military officer coming to tell them that their loved one is among the latest to lose their lives in what some in the political establishment term a “war of choice.”

Others, including Richard Clarke, the head of US counterterrorism in the last three US administrations, have described this war as “unnecessary” and counterproductive. This makes the deaths of these soldiers, as well as the killing and maiming of countless Iraqi civilians, not only pointless, but criminal.

US troops must be withdrawn immediately to save them not only from mounting casualties, but also from the criminal actions that they are being ordered to carry out in the name of the American people. One year after the fall of Baghdad, the US military is waging a savage war against the very people

that American troops were told they had “liberated.”

In Fallujah, a siege has been mounted against a city of more than 300,000 people. An entire civilian population has been subjected to shelling and aerial bombardment as residents with light arms battle F-16 fighters, tanks and Apache helicopters. Food, water and electricity have been cut off, and, in the words of one Marine officer, Iraqi corpses have been “stacked up like cord wood.”

On Friday, a cease-fire was announced—and immediately violated by US forces—to allow terrified women and children to flee on foot from their homes in the embattled city. Medical authorities in Fallujah reported Friday that at least 400 have been killed—among them women and babies—and over 1,000 wounded, most of them civilians.

In the teeming streets of Baghdad’s Sadr City, US helicopters have fired missiles into houses; tanks have driven down residential streets machine-gunning homes and killing people inside. Cars driving on the streets of the impoverished Shiite district have been rocketed, their drivers and passengers burned alive.

The top US military commander in Iraq, Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, addressed the deaths of civilians, calling it “regrettable,” but adding “that is a fact when you’re on a battlefield of this nature in an urban environment.” It is a “fact” when you are a foreign occupier, carrying out operations that are in blatant violation of the Geneva Convention by attacking people defending their own cities and homes.

What will be the impact of this “fact” of killing women and children upon the troops ordered to execute these operations? It is not just the grievously wounded whose lives are being shattered by the Iraq war. Many more will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and many will carry with them the images of the dead for the rest of their lives.

Low morale in a war based on lies

According to the US Army’s own mental health study released last month, morale among the US troops is abysmal. Of those interviewed, 72 percent characterized the morale of their own units as low or very low, while 52 percent said that their personal morale was low or very low. The suicide rate among occupation troops is alarmingly high—17.3 per 100,000 soldiers. This compares with just 3.6 per 100,000 during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The report found that a “significant proportion” of soldiers “experienced and reported behavioral health concerns” that were often ignored.

The collapse of morale is bound up with the fact that the soldiers are being compelled to fight a war launched on the

basis of lies. Those who fight for a cause in which they believe do not suffer from morale problems. The American soldiers in Iraq see no such cause. They are defending a US colonial administration that is lining the pockets of Halliburton and other politically connected contractors and a Quisling Iraqi "Governing Council" that enjoys no popular support among the Iraqi people.

The soldiers themselves have been lied to, repeatedly told at the last minute that their tours of duty have been extended. Soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division, for example, had the date of their departure from Iraq postponed at least five times. Now, the Pentagon is saying that they may be rushed back to Iraq to bolster the crumbling US occupation. Many of these soldiers have been home for little more than six months.

In the face of the present uprising, as many as 25,000 soldiers set to return home have been told that they must stay. Reservists and National Guard members, who previously could count on having to serve on active duty no more than six months at a stretch, now face deployments of a year or more in Iraq, as do full-time soldiers.

Washington's claim that US occupation forces would be drawn down and replaced by Iraqi security forces has proven to be one more deception. In the face of the current uprising, Iraqi police recruited by the occupation authority either melted away or joined the insurgents.

The US administration and the Pentagon are preparing for an open-ended occupation of Iraq. The military is constructing permanent bases from which American soldiers would be sent to suppress nationalist revolts and enforce the will of Washington's colonial administrators for years to come.

The American people did not support a war to colonize Iraq. An opinion poll, released on April 5—before the full scope of the catastrophe the Bush administration has created in Iraq was well known—showed that 44 percent of the American people want US troops brought home now. This is an extraordinary figure, given that not a single prominent American politician has called for such a withdrawal and the mass media relentlessly promotes the US occupation of Iraq.

Who speaks for these millions of Americans, not to mention the soldiers who want to come home? What opportunity will they be given in the upcoming US election to make their will known?

The Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, supports the occupation and is committed to continuing the bloodletting in Iraq. His differences with Bush are merely tactical, over the best means to prosecute this dirty colonial war.

Like the Republican incumbent, Kerry represents the interests of US banks, oil companies and multinationals. The

financial oligarchy in the US is determined to hold on to Iraq and its vast oil reserves to further its own profit interests and seize a decisive geo-strategic advantage over current and future economic rivals.

In the face of the popular uprising, both Republican and Democratic politicians are advancing their last-ditch justifications for continuing the occupation. We cannot withdraw now, they say, because it would leave the country in chaos and cast doubt around the world on America's will—or more bluntly, its ability to impose its dictates on other nations by means of military force. "Failure is not an option," Kerry has stated repeatedly.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that, on the contrary, success in this criminal venture would be a blow to the interests of working people, in the US, the Middle East, and around the world. It would represent the consolidation of an American colonial empire and set the stage for future and bloodier wars of aggression.

It would also mean a further attack on the democratic rights of working people within the US. A government that imposes colonial dictatorships abroad will inevitably move to snuff out democratic rights at home. And far from making Americans safer, a continuation of this war can only fuel the legitimate anger of the masses throughout the Middle East, creating an ample pool of recruits for those who advocate terrorism against American targets.

The SEP insists that the Iraqi people and the people of the entire Middle East must be free to determine their own political destiny, without being subject to the dictates of US proconsuls. They must also be permitted to control their own natural resources in order to benefit the masses of workers and poor, rather than the US oil conglomerates.

Ending the US occupation of Iraq requires a break with the present two-party system. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans respond to the demands of working people. Neither of these parties has any concern for the fate of working class youth in uniform who are suffering the horrific consequences of Washington's war against the Iraqi people.

What is required is the emergence of a new, mass political movement of working people fighting to end the subordination not only of foreign policy, but every facet of social life to the interests of the corporate elite.

Our party is intervening in the 2004 elections to lay the political foundations for the development of such a movement. We will use this campaign to popularize the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq, Afghanistan and the entire region, and for war crimes trials against all those responsible for conspiring to launch an unprovoked war and colonial occupation.

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