

David Walsh at Detroit forum: "Great questions confront artists and intellectuals"

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Below we publish WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh's remarks to the December 8 forum at the Museum of New Art in Detroit: "Artists and the War Against Iraq."

The first responsibility of artists, like that of every other category of conscious and intelligent human beings, is to grasp the character of the impending US war against Iraq and its vast implications.

We should not mince words. This is a war of plunder, a war aimed at establishing US control over Iraqi oil reserves, the second largest of any country in the world. A war of the most powerful country in the world against one of the weakest; Iraq's population is the same size as that of the New York City metropolitan area and it has a GDP smaller than the personal wealth of Bill Gates. It has suffered enormously at the hands of the US military, up to two million civilian deaths as a result of US and UN-imposed sanctions since 1991. The Iraqi military capacity has shrunk to one-third of its size at the time of the Gulf War, while the US military budget now exceeds the combined total of military spending by the next 25 countries in the world.

This is an imperialist war, in the scientific sense of the term—that is to say, a colonial-style war waged by and in the interests of the ruling elite of an advanced capitalist country against a poor and oppressed country. It is unprovoked, aggressive and “pre-emptive,” organized to establish US control and occupation of Iraq, no matter the cost. All the talk about “weapons of mass destruction” and bringing democracy to Iraq is dust thrown in the public's face.

And the cost will be high. A recent report by the Oxford Research Group indicated that in the US, “Munitions plants are currently working 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” and they are building the most powerful and deadly weapons ever devised. One of these weapons, which the US military is itching to use, is the “Big Blue” slurry bomb, the world's most powerful conventional weapon, which, when detonated, produces overpressures of up to 1000 pounds per square inch, close to those of a tactical nuclear weapon.

The American military may have a relatively easy time of it in the short-term, it may not. But it is prepared to slaughter tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians or more. The Oxford Research report notes that a war game carried out at the US Naval College in 1995, called Global Exercise, ended with the US

launching a nuclear attack on Baghdad. Anyone who believes that such a possibility is excluded is simply not awake to the character of the US ruling elite and the Bush administration.

Consider the events of the past week. Faced with the failure of the weapons inspectors to find anything, the US government has begun pressuring the inspectors to organize the kidnapping of Iraqi scientists, so that they can be taken out of the country and interrogated by US intelligence. As we have noted on our web site, the proposal, in defiance of international law and elementary democratic rights, is worthy of Mafia gangsters.

Iraq has handed over a 12,000-page document, denying that it has weapons of mass destruction or plans to build them. The US says it will compare the Iraqi declaration with its own intelligence reports. The obvious question, that no one in the American mass media will ask, is: if Washington, in fact, has damning information, why did it not hand the information over to the inspectors, so they could go and expose the Iraqis on the ground?

The recent statements by Bush and others in the administration are incoherent efforts to pose as supporters of inspections, while rejecting their significance.

US intelligence reports, which are available to no one, are the sole criterion by which the administration will determine its decision to go to war. As we have noted, the administration has created a sinister Catch-22: If Iraq admits that it has weapons of mass destruction, it is in violation of its agreements and subject to attack; if it denies that it has them, and US intelligence claims that it does, it is in breach of the agreements and a legitimate target for war. No matter what Iraq does, the US will claim the right to invade, occupy and seize the country's oil riches.

And the subservient US media, dominated by a handful of conglomerates, eagerly passes on the absurd claims of the American government as fact. It is a matter of debate which is the more repulsive sight, Rumsfeld or Cheney or Bush lying and bullying shamelessly in public, or the highly-paid prostitutes of the American media drooling over the prospects of a new war and an extension of US corporate domination.

But make no mistake about it, the organization of the war in Iraq is a criminal enterprise. These are not mistaken policies. Whether it be the proposal to abduct Iraqi scientists, or the daily bombings, or the international campaign to bribe, coerce

or intimidate other governments to go along with its policies, the Bush administration functions like a criminal gang.

I use this term advisedly. What we have seen over the past decade in particular—through the impeachment drive based on a manufactured sex scandal, the hijacking of the 2000 election by the Bush camp, all accompanied by the revelations about pervasive corporate criminality—is the rise of the political underworld to dominance in Washington. A government that came to power by fraud and deception will rule by fraud and deception. There is no difference between the means used by the Enron and WorldCom boards of directors and the methods employed by Bush and Cheney in Iraq.

And, one must bear in mind, that Iraq is only the beginning. The list is a long one: North Korea, Iran, Libya, Syria—and who knows, in the not so distant future, China, Russia.... In reality, now that the US, in its recent “National Security Strategy” report, has declared its right to use military force, whenever it chooses, against any country in the world it perceives to be a threat to American interests, there is no country that is immune from possible US attack. The aim is to overcome the loss of American economic hegemony through the use of US military superiority. This will encounter massive resistance, at home and abroad.

It is not the strategy of a healthy, self-confident elite. And there is of course another side to the war drive, the attempt to divert the population from the growing social crisis at home and the overall crisis and decay of American capitalism. According to the official figures there are some 10 million unemployed in the US, including those who have given up looking for work.

The US today is a plutocracy, a society run in the interests of billionaires and millionaires. According to the most recent figures, for example, the richest 13,000 families in America have nearly as much income as the 20 million poorest households. Those 13,000 families have incomes 300 times that of average families.

Democracy cannot, in the end, survive in a society that is so sharply divided along economic lines. The Bush administration, using the pretext of September 11, has pushed ahead with measures, in the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security bill, which effectively lay the basis for a police-state dictatorship.

There is widespread opposition to what is going on, to the policies of both parties, their militarism, their defense of the rich, their unending attacks on living standards and the working class—but how is this opposition to make itself known? Where can it be articulated? Opposition will erupt, as it always has in US history, outside the official channels.

I believe a mass movement in opposition to war and social inequality in this country will emerge. The question then is: on what basis.

In my view, protests based on an orientation to pressuring Congress and the Democratic Party will be self-defeating and futile and ultimately demoralizing. Those of us in this room

who remember the anti-Vietnam protests have a particular responsibility to consider the lessons of that experience. I can recall, as a senior in high school in New York City, standing four hours in Central Park waiting to begin marching on April 15, 1967. The mass of people was so large that the rally at the UN several miles away finished before we had a chance to start walking. There were perhaps three-quarters of a million demonstrating in New York alone on that day. But one must ask, did that movement halt US militarism? To look at the current situation is to answer the question. It did not, because the protests remained within the orbit of capitalism and the two-party system.

In my view, a far more politically critical mass movement has to be built, an international popular movement against imperialism. Within the US, this means liberating working people from their association with the Democratic Party and building a new, independent socialist party.

I want to say a few words, in conclusion, about the artist’s role. In my view, the artist must as a matter of course oppose militarism, brutality, lies, hypocrisy, corruption, the power of wealth and social inequality.

Great questions confront artists and intellectuals, political and moral questions—they may not be prepared for them, these have not been years in which courage and principle have been prized and rewarded, but they will confront them all the same.

The artist, as one of the most sensitive members of the community, must accept the responsibilities that go along with that: the obligation to tell the truth, to confront the most unpleasant truths, to communicate them, whether they are immediately popular or not. Those driven by money and career and status and celebrity will never produce anything of lasting value. The worship of greed and the market has had its impact on the so-called intelligentsia too. We need a rededication to artistic truth, to principle, to sticking one’s neck out, to going against the current, to slapping the face of the media and the establishment. And such positions will not be merely gestures, they will find a response in the population.

Don’t believe those who tell you that Bush is beloved, that war is popular, that anyone who opposes Bush and war will be despised. He or she will be despised by the witch-hunters of the right-wing media, but he or she, in the long run, will earn the admiration and respect of wide layers of the population. That is the lesson of history and it holds true today.



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