Second massacre in Iraqi town

A protracted, dirty war of colonial occupation

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1 May 2003

For the second time in barely 48 hours, US Army paratroopers opened fire Wednesday on unarmed demonstrators in the Iraqi town of Fallujah, killing three people and wounding approximately 16, several of them critically.

The carnage erupted during a march by thousands of the town's residents who were protesting the killing of at least 13 demonstrators on Monday night, when a crowd of students and youth had assembled outside a school occupied by the US troops, demanding that they leave so classes could resume. The soldiers opened fire at close range. Among the dead were three children under the age of 10.

Witnesses to Wednesday's shootings, including town officials, insisted that the American soldiers opened fire after children in the crowd threw stones and shoes at them. Among the many protest signs carried by the crowd, one banner read: "Sooner or later, US killers, we will kick you out."

The first shots reportedly came from a convoy of jeeps and armored vehicles. Other soldiers guarding the headquarters of a battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division fired from the rooftop of the compound that the unit has occupied, the local headquarters of the Baathists, the former ruling party.

Attack helicopters then swooped low over the city, dispersing the crowd with the threat of even deadlier violence.

As with the Monday night shootings, the US Central Command claimed that the American troops "returned fire" after being shot at by demonstrators. But, also as with the earlier massacre, not a single American soldier suffered the slightest injury and there was no physical evidence of bullets having struck the compound or the convoy.

"This was a peaceful demonstration. Religious leaders told us not to be armed. There was no exchange of fire," one witness, Safra Rusli, told reporters. "I saw three people killed before my own eyes."

Prominent figures in the town were clearly taken aback by the repressive violence. "Why? The demonstrators didn't use guns, so why should the soldiers start attacking them," asked the imam of the Grand Fallujah Mosque, Jamal Shaquir Mahmood. "There is no (Iraqi) military presence here. Why is there an American military presence?"

One could possibly see the first massacre as a terrible, if inevitable, tragedy arising from the conditions of colonial occupation, with young soldiers panicking in the face of a hostile population. The second attack on unarmed demonstrators in the same city, coming on the heels of this massacre, however, points to a deliberate policy of lethal violence aimed at breaking the will of the Iraqi people.

"Everything was within the rules of engagement,' " Capt. Jeff Wilbur, an 82nd Airborne civil affairs officer told the media. "There'll be no formal investigation."

The question of what US troops are doing in Fallujah, a town of about a quarter of a million people located 35 miles west of Baghdad, is a good one. According to local leaders, there are no military objectives there, given that the Iraqi army and police fled the town on the day Baghdad fell. The local population elected a new mayor, while Muslim clerics succeeded in curtailing looting and even returning property that had been taken.

The hostility of the town to foreign occupation has deep roots. In 1991, it was the scene of one of the worst atrocities of the first Persian Gulf War, when a British warplane dropped bombs on a crowded market, killing 150 civilians.

This political hostility and the successful restoration of social order by the local population itself may well be what made the town a target for military repression. Washington has made it clear that it will not tolerate any local political forces "usurping" the power that the US itself has grabbed through a war of aggression.

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The Bush administration's aim is to install a puppet regime founded principally upon the corrupt group of émigrés that has attached itself to the Pentagon's right-wing civilian leadership together with ex-Baathists and others who can be bribed into participating. The Bush administration's hypocritical paeans to Iraqi "democracy" notwithstanding, the sole purpose of this regime will be to legitimize the permanent US military occupation of the country and the expropriation of its vast oil wealth through privatization and sale to US-based energy giants.

What is being prepared is a ruthlessly repressive regime backed by US military firepower. A pair of opinion columns written this week by two supporters of the war with close ties to the Pentagon spelled this out.

Daniel Pipes, the right-wing professor and columnist who joined the Bush administration's anti-terrorism task force, warned that the mass anti-American demonstrations, not only in Fallujah, but also by Shiites during the recent pilgrimage to Karbala, "have ominous implications for the coalition forces."

Predicting that Iraq would need 20 years to "reach full democracy," Pipes counseled that in the meantime, the country needs a "strongman," along the lines of "Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan." He ignores the obvious fact that this is precisely what existed in Baghdad before the US invasion.

"As for the coalition forces, after installing a strongman they should phase out their visible role and pull back to a few military bases away from population centers," Pipes added. "From these, they can quietly serve as the military partner of the new government, guaranteeing its ultimate security."

In other words, US troops will be kept in Iraq to guard essential facilities—oil fields, pipelines and ports—and to intervene with overwhelming firepower whenever necessary to suppress popular opposition to the Washington-sponsored "strongman."

This strategy is remarkably similar to that pursued by Britain during its colonial rule of Iraq in the 1920s. British forces for the most part pursued a policy of neglect toward the Iraqi people, but responded with aerial bombardments and poison gas whenever there were signs of popular resistance.

Sounding a similar theme, Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, a man who justified the war against Iraq on every grounds from weapons of mass destruction to the US need to control oil, as well as with fervent predictions of a flowering of Iraqi "democracy," wrote his column in the voice of Saddam Hussein giving friendly advice to George Bush.

"If you want to build a self-governing authority here, you had better understand that 'shock and awe' is not just for war-making," Friedman wrote. "It's an everyday tool for running this place...I ran Iraq with an iron fist. You're trying to run it on the cheap with an iron finger. No way."

While Friedman puts the words in the mouth of Saddam Hussein, the gangster language is his own and reflects the thinking within top circles within the Bush administration about the kind of regime that it requires to realize its predatory aims in the US.

There has been no US expression of regret about the killings in Fallujah because American officials know full well that they are only the beginning of what will be a long and bloody campaign to subdue the Iraqi people.

Jay Garner, the retired general and former arms industry executive who was tapped by the Bush administration to serve as the US overlord in Iraq, chastised the American media at a press conference in Baghdad Wednesday. They should pay less attention to protests by Iraqis and spend more time lauding the US military's victory, he said.

"We ought to be beating our chests every day," he said. "We ought to look in a mirror and get proud and stick out our chests and suck in our bellies and say: 'Damn, we're Americans.'" Clearly, the unstated implication was that no one can question the right of proud Americans to slaughter Iraqis as they see fit.

Given the role of the media throughout the preparation and execution of the war against Iraq, there is every reason to believe that they will follow Garner's advice.

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