

The Wall Street Journal and the occupation of Iraq

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The American invasion of Iraq was justified with two lies. The first was that Iraq threatened the United States and the world with “weapons of mass destruction.” The second was that the US military was carrying out “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and would be welcomed by the Iraqi people as “liberators.” The reality of a neo-colonial US authority in Baghdad and Iraqi popular resistance against the American occupation is discrediting the lie of “liberation” as thoroughly as the failure to produce any evidence has discredited the lie of “weapons of mass destruction.”

It is in this context that it is worth taking note of the arguments being developed on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. Directed to an audience that largely supports and profits from US militarism, *Journal* editorials often articulate the response to political developments by the most reactionary sections of the American establishment that dominate the Bush administration.

The *Journal* editorial on July 7, headlined “Saddam’s Counterattack,” is a case in point. The authors of the editorial are concerned that “the war’s opponents have been exploiting the difficult aftermath to insist it should never have been fought” and that opinion polls in the US show “some erosion in public support.” It ignores the fact that the disquiet stems from the mounting realization that the White House—with the collaboration of the media—lied to the American people. Rather, the *Journal* argues, the reason is that the Bush administration has not responded aggressively enough to the resistance that is developing against US forces in Iraq:

“[R]emnants from Saddam Hussein’s regime are mounting an anti-American guerrilla war. They have been joined by jihadis from around the world who see a chance to inflict enough casualties to undermine American resolve and drive America home before a new Iraqi government can assert control. What is unfolding, in short, is a counterattack intended to deal the US war on terror a dispiriting defeat.”

The *Journal* admonishes the Bush administration for having been “slow to recognize and describe the nature of this threat.” The editorial criticizes the White House

response as being to “hunker down and compare security in Baghdad to the crime rate in Washington DC....” It notes that “criminals in the US aren’t lobbing mortar rounds into military bases” or “putting a bullet into a soldier in the gun seat of his Bradley Fighting Vehicle....”

Any questioning of the newly acquired US control of Iraq—a “dispiriting defeat” for the American ruling class—is not an option. The *Wall Street Journal* wants Bush to stand before the American population and tell them he was wrong on May 1 when he declared the war in Iraq was over.

A presidential declaration that the US faces a guerrilla war in Iraq, the *Journal* is convinced, will rally “public support.” Moreover, it will legitimize repressive measures in Iraq that go far beyond the brutality already carried out by US forces. The *Journal* urges Washington to “consider larger-scale detentions, especially in the Sunni-Baathist heartland north of Baghdad,” and US-run “military tribunals” against former members of the Baathist party.

The US military is already conducting widespread raids and detaining hundreds of Iraqis on suspicion that they are Baath loyalists or were involved in attacks on American forces. The *Journal* editorial writers do not specify what “larger-scale detentions” they think are necessary. Such a prescription, however, has an inevitable logic.

During the Vietnam War, US forces combed villages for members of the Viet Cong (VC), interrogating and brutalizing a terrified civilian population and “detaining” suspects. In his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, US general William Westmoreland bluntly described the conclusion he and other American commanders ultimately reached: “So closely entwined were some populated localities with the tentacles of the VC base area, in some cases actually integrated into the defenses, and so sympathetic were some of the people to the VC that the only way to establish control short of constant combat operations among the people was to remove the people and destroy the village....” The policing actions degenerated into acts of genocide, such as the 1968 massacre of villagers at My Lai.

There is another historical precedent that bears even closer

similarity to the US occupation of Iraq than Vietnam. The *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed on other occasions to the parallels between the eruption of US militarism over the past two years and the aggression unleashed by the German Nazi regime. The analogy is as true for the post-invasion policies as it is for the economic and political processes that have resulted in 146,000 US troops ruling over 24 million Iraqis.

In the Balkan states of Yugoslavia and Greece, after a rapid conquest of the countries, the German Nazi regime was confronted with an intractable war against resistance movements. Nazi efforts to suppress guerrilla activities progressed from detaining suspected partisans to reprisal killings of civilians and wholesale massacres. Mark Mazower, an author on the Nazi occupation of Greece, noted in his work *Inside Hitler's Greece*: "One of the basic assumptions behind German occupation policy was that 'terror had to be answered with terror' to force the population to withdraw support from the insurgents." (*Inside Hitler's Greece*, Mark Mazower, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 173)

In a fashion similar to that of the Bush administration, the Nazis characterized the resistance fighters as terrorists and criminals. Mazower points out, "[R]egarding the guerrillas as inhuman, criminal or racially inferiors undoubtedly helped to erode the [German] troops' moral and legal inhibitions against the use of 'harsh and ruthless measures.'" (*ibid*, p. 160). If the *Wall Street Journal* has its way, US imperialism is on the path to using just as harsh and ruthless measures in what it calls the "Sunni-Baathist heartland" of Iraq.

Underpinning the *Journal's* call for stepped-up repression in Iraq is the right-wing mythology as to why the US was defeated in Vietnam. According to this myth, US administrations were intimidated by the antiwar movement at home, which tied the hands of the military and prevented it from carrying out a "total war" to defeat the Vietnamese. The majority of the American people, the right-wing claims, did not oppose the war. They simply lost confidence in the determination of the government to win it.

The *Journal* editorial asserts: "The lesson we draw from American wars is that the public will accept casualties, *even in large numbers*, as long as it feels the cause warrants it and that its leaders have a strategy to succeed. As late as May of 1967, long into the war and after more than 10,300 US deaths, 50 percent of the American public still supported the conflict in Vietnam" (emphasis added).

The *Journal* confidently reassures its readers that with a sufficiently concerted war against the Iraqi guerrillas, "there is every reason to believe" the US will eventually defeat the "Baathist-terror counterattack." It takes comfort in the fact

that the Iraqi guerrillas, unlike the Vietnamese, have neither the backing of a rival great power nor the ability to cross borders into "foreign sanctuary." And it is convinced that the American people "won't turn against the US commitment in Iraq *merely* because of casualties" (emphasis added).

By 1967, an antiwar movement was gaining strength in the US and internationally due to a variety of factors, ranging from concern over the number of American casualties to the atrocities being carried out against the Vietnamese people—which unlike today were being broadcast by a media with some degree of independence from the state.

Today, an open struggle against the occupation of Iraq will not *merely* be motivated by US casualties. It will also be motivated by knowledge of the neo-colonial crimes being carried out by the American military. It will also be inspired by a consciousness that the entire war was based upon lies and carried out for the benefit of the same Wall Street financial oligarchy that has plundered the American economy over the last two decades.

The global mass demonstrations in February 2003 testified that, even in advance of the invasion of Iraq, antiwar sentiment was just as pervasive as in 1967, if not more so. While it has remained largely politically inarticulate since the fall of Baghdad, it has not gone away and it will resurface over the coming months in increasingly volatile forms.

For the *Wall Street Journal*, the lesson from Vietnam is that the US government should disregard opposition as a treacherous fifth column and carry on regardless. Indeed, it is not rash to predict that the next editorial in the *Journal* calling for "larger-scale detentions" is likely to be directed against the American opponents of the Bush administration's foreign policy.



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