

The New York Times's “liberal” argument for colonial occupation

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In the run-up to the Bush administration's war against Iraq, the *New York Times* staked out a position that only confirmed the putrefaction of American liberalism. It promoted the case for a US invasion, while sanctimoniously chiding the administration for failing to make sufficient efforts to secure a United Nations mandate for its aggression.

The newspaper played a leading role in disseminating the lie that served as the principal justification for the US military action—that Iraq's “weapons of mass destruction” posed an imminent threat to the American people.

Its senior correspondent Judith Miller, working in direct collaboration with the Pentagon-sponsored Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, floated one story after another justifying the war based on supposedly “exclusive” evidence of Iraqi WMD. She was not only “embedded” with a military team assigned to search for the non-existent weapons after the invasion, but reportedly manipulated its activities to further her own political agenda.

The intelligence provided by Chalabi and his associates inevitably proved false. Nonetheless, Miller's claims were amplified by network and cable television news broadcasts in a cynical campaign to frighten the American people.

Now, more than six months after the fall of Baghdad, with multiple teams of military weapons inspectors having scoured the country, not a trace of the deadly weapons that both the Bush administration and the *Times* claimed posed an imminent danger have been found. The facts are indisputable: the Bush administration dragged the American people into war based on a lie, and the editors of the *Times* were its accomplices.

This makes the latest piece by *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, appearing in the October 15 issue of the newspaper, all the more cowardly and self-serving. Entitled “Holding Our Noses,” the column amounts to a brief for the Democratic Party as it prepares to support the allocation of \$87 billion requested by Bush to finance the US occupation of Iraq.

The column begins by noting the failure to find any WMD, the mounting attacks by the Iraqi resistance on US soldiers, and the spiraling costs of the occupation. Kristof quips that while it was “sporting” for him to write opinion pieces opposing the war in January—before it happened—now “criticizing the war just seems too easy, like aiming a bomb at Bambi.”

Never mind that real bombs are being aimed at American soldiers, including members of the National Guard and the reserves, who are dying daily in Iraq. Never mind that the Iraqi

people themselves are the targets of brutal repression and collective punishment, or that the funds diverted to finance military operations will entail a new round of budget cuts that will affect millions of working people in the US. Criticizing the war is “too easy,” so Kristof elects to support it.

“In any case,” he writes, “the real question that confronts us now is not whether invading Iraq was the height of hubris, but this: Given that we are there, how do we make the best of it?”

He continues: “I'm afraid that too many in my dovish camp think that just because we shouldn't have invaded, we also shouldn't stay—or at least we shouldn't help Mr. Bush pay the bill. Mr. Bush's \$87 billion budget request for Iraq and Afghanistan is getting pummeled on Capitol Hill this week, partly because people are angry at being misled and patronized by this administration... So my fear is that we will now compound our mistake of invading Iraq by refusing to pay for our occupation and then pulling out our troops prematurely.”

This line of argumentation raises one rather obvious question. Is there no connection between what Kristof characterizes as the “height of hubris”—what could be described more bluntly as a war crime—in invading Iraq, and the goals that are being pursued through the ongoing occupation and military action?

In an earlier period, anti-communist liberals like the *Times* columnist would routinely condemn socialism from the standpoint that the “end” of social equality could never justify the “means” of social revolution. No such high-sounding moral qualms are raised, however, about the supposed ends of “democracy,” “peace” and “development” in Iraq being realized through the killing and maiming of tens of thousands of people, all carried out on the basis of lies and in defiance of international law.

When it is a question of crimes carried out to defend the interests of the ruling elite, it is, to borrow Kristof's unfortunate phrase, merely a matter of “holding our noses”—presumably to keep out the stench of so many corpses.

In reality, criminal means are employed for the realization of criminal ends. The US war and occupation of Iraq are no exception. The lies about WMD and “terrorism” were designed to mask the real aims of those in the Bush administration who coldly planned this war as an act of conquest and plunder. The principal objectives have from the beginning been the establishment of US control over Iraq's oil wealth and the securing of hegemony in an area of the world that is strategically vital to the interests of US imperialism.

The conquest of Iraq, moreover, is conceived of as only the initial step in an agenda of global war and plunder.

As for the \$87 billion, there is ample evidence that the demand for this vast sum is part of a venal money-making scheme by those who control the levers of power in Washington. Kristof himself points to a request for \$50 million to build a cement factory that Iraqis proved capable of constructing for \$80,000, and cites doubts within the American public about the allotment of \$50,000 apiece for the purchase of garbage trucks.

“Granted, some elements of the budget (like much of our Iraq operation) seem too rooted in our own expectations,” he declares blandly. The “expectations” are those of a layer of politically connected corporate criminals who are preparing to loot the US treasury and rip off the American people to further enrich themselves. More than three quarters of the \$87 billion will go to finance the occupation forces, with a sizable portion of these funds flowing into the coffers of companies such as Vice President Richard Cheney’s Halliburton that hold lucrative service contracts with the military.

The \$20 billion for reconstruction will be parceled out to these same firms in “cost-plus” contracts guaranteeing them a hefty profit over and above whatever they spend. A recent report issued by the United Nations and World Bank placed the cost of reconstruction in Iraq at precisely half the amount budgeted by Bush.

In other words, billions of dollars will be siphoned off—paid for through cuts in social programs, living standards and jobs—to fatten the portfolios of corporate executives and their principal stockholders.

For Iraqis, “reconstruction” is to include the wholesale privatization of the country’s economy in the kind of “shock therapy” that devastated living standards and employment for masses of people in the former Soviet bloc a decade ago.

The US viceroy in Iraq, Paul Bremer, last month decreed the most radical “free market” economic policy seen anywhere in the world, essentially placing all of Iraq’s enterprises on the auction block for purchase or liquidation by US-based corporations and banks. That the imposition of such changes constitutes a gross violation of the international laws governing the behavior of occupying powers is apparently of no more concern to the Bush administration than the launching of the illegal war itself.

Kristof offers a bit of friendly advice to the administration, urging it to carry out “an early transfer of sovereignty back to Iraqis,” in order to diffuse the eruption of nationalist hostility to this looting operation. “Sure, it may be only a symbolic gesture, but anyone who says symbols don’t matter doesn’t understand nationalism,” he declares. The *Times* columnist adds: “Above all, to stave off catastrophe in Iraq, we must keep our troops there and provide security, for that is the glue that keeps Iraq together.”

Does Kristof really believe that the Iraqi people are so naïve as to believe in the “sovereignty” of a regime to which the US transfers “symbolic” power, while it continues the military occupation of the country? If so, it is Kristof who understands nothing about the history of Iraq and its long struggle against colonialism and national oppression.

The arguments put forward by the *Times* columnist are hardly

unique. They echo the positions taken by the leadership of the Democratic Party and the leading contenders for its presidential nomination.

This was spelled out once again in the October 9 candidates’ debate in Arizona. Former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who became the early front-runner for the nomination by casting himself as an anti-war candidate, declared: “Now that we’re there, we can’t pull out responsibly. Because if we do, there are more Al Qaeda, I believe, in Iraq today than before the president went in.”

General Wesley Clark, who similarly rose in the polls with belated criticisms of the administration’s war policy, urged the adaptation of a “strategy for success” in Iraq. This, he explained, consists of turning over the creation of a new regime and the handling of reconstruction to the United Nations. “We need to keep control of the military piece and support our armed forces,” he added.

None of these candidates—nor Kristof, for that matter—define what would constitute the “success” of a US occupation. In the end, behind platitudes about “democracy” and “economic development,” the answer is clearly the imposition of a US puppet regime that establishes firm American control over Iraq and its oil fields. That objective entails an unending war against the people of Iraq that will cost many thousands of lives, American and Iraqi alike, and that the US will ultimately lose.

The “success” envisioned by the ruling elite and its representatives—Republican and Democratic alike—would have catastrophic implications for the peoples of the Middle East, the United States and the entire world. The successful subjugation of Iraq through a war of aggression would only set the stage for future such wars against not only targeted “rogue states” like Syria, Iran, Libya and Cuba, but, ultimately, against more powerful economic rivals in Asia and Europe itself.

American working people have no interest in following Kristof’s advice about “holding their noses” and supporting Bush’s war. The stench of criminality that pervades the entire venture cannot be blocked out in any case.

The demand must be raised for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from Iraq. A full and independent investigation must be organized into the way in which the war was prepared, and those responsible for it held accountable, through impeachment and criminal prosecution.

While the corporate looting that is being prepared through Bush’s \$87 billion occupation bill must be opposed, reparations should be paid to Iraq for the destruction and carnage it has suffered in the war and the previous decade of economic sanctions. Full compensation should be paid as well to the families of American servicemen who have been killed or wounded in this illegal war.



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