

US media sanctions campaign of atrocities in Iraq

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The visible disarray of the Bush administration's Iraq policy, in the wake of a series of military-political disasters—the shooting down of helicopters, suicide bombings, the mortar attacks on US occupation headquarters in the “Green Zone” in central Baghdad—is a turning point in the war in Iraq.

No one should think that the administration's “exit strategy” from Iraq will involve a precipitate withdrawal. On the contrary, all indications are that the White House and Pentagon are preparing an onslaught of military violence against the resistance in Iraq that will include the most barbaric methods, including mass killings and the establishment of concentration camps for suspected opponents.

One way of gauging the plans being discussed at the highest levels of the administration is to review certain commentaries that have appeared in the US media in recent weeks urging a more violent and wide-ranging program of counterinsurgency in Iraq. These columns and editorials are not so much aimed at American public opinion—that campaign will come when the circumstances are ripe for it—as at shoring up the administration's own morale and preparing the ruling elite as a whole for the horrific measures that will be undertaken.

The spearhead of this media campaign is the *Washington Post*, the leading daily in the US capital, which has emerged as the most ferocious and bellicose supporter of victory in Iraq among those journals formerly identified with political liberalism.

In an October 29 editorial, headlined “The Ramadan Offensive,” the *Post* compared recent events in Iraq to the 1968 Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War, which proved to be a turning point in the US defeat. While the nationwide offensive launched during the Vietnamese new year holiday (Tet) was a military defeat for the insurgents, the *Post* argued, it led to a decisive loss of public support for the war. The danger was that the series of attacks launched by the Iraqi resistance during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan could have the same political significance.

“...[I]n light of the steady escalation of enemy attacks, the question is whether US forces have developed the tactics and drawn on the resources necessary for the job. More troops, or more troops able to carry out counterinsurgency operations, would surely help,” the editorial argued. “Waging a more effective campaign of counterinsurgency and reconstruction is the only responsible way to respond to the enemy's Ramadan offensive.”

A week later, the *Post* published two further commentaries, one in the name of Arizona senator John McCain, the former Vietnam POW and leading advocate of sending more US troops to Iraq.

“Iraq is not Vietnam,” McCain declared. “There is no popular, anti-colonial insurgency in Iraq. Our opponents, who number only in the thousands in a country of 23 million, are despised by the vast majority

of Iraqis... These murderers cannot carry the banner of Iraqi nationalism, as Ho Chi Minh did in Vietnam for decades.”

(It is a notable irony that McCain and others who deny the parallels between Vietnam and Iraq invariably pay tribute to the mass support and popular legitimacy of the Vietnamese liberation fighters. However, at the time, while the Vietnam conflict was raging, US government officials generally described the National Liberation Front (NLF)/Vietcong in the same terms that Bush & Co. use for today's Iraqi resistance—i.e., as terrorists, assassins, murderers, supporters of the “dictator” Ho Chi Minh, etc.)

McCain continued: “We lost in Vietnam because we lost the will to fight, because we did not understand the nature of the war we were fighting and because we limited the tools at our disposal.”

These are words worth pondering. In what way did the US government limit the tools employed by the military in Vietnam? These included more than 500,000 troops, thousands of warplanes, saturation bombing of both the north and south of the country, more bomb tonnage than was used in all theaters of World War II combined, napalm, Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals, and the most advanced electronic monitoring and booby-trapping available at the time.

The only weapons in the US arsenal not used—“smart” weapons, fuel-air explosives and other such weapons not yet being developed—were the atomic and hydrogen bombs. Those weapons were not used, not so much because of a self-restraint applied from Washington out of concern for their genocidal impact, but because of the clear danger that the Soviet Union and China, both possessed of similar armaments, might retaliate in kind.

McCain concludes with a correct observation about the imbecility of the administration's claims that “Iraqization” is a viable strategy for the war. “If the U.S. military, the world's best fighting force, cannot defeat the Iraqi insurgents, how do we expect Iraqi militiamen with only weeks of training to do any better?” he asks. His conclusion is that the Bush administration should deploy at least another full division in Iraq, “giving us the necessary manpower to conduct a focused counterinsurgency campaign across the Sunni Triangle that seals off enemy operating areas, conducts search-and-destroy missions and holds territory.”

On the same day, a column by the *Post*'s principal foreign columnist, Jim Hoagland, also called for such an intensive campaign of military reprisals. Hoagland bemoaned the fact that from May 1 through November 8, 149 American soldiers had been killed by hostile fire in Iraq, while zero Iraqis had been executed or imprisoned for those attacks.

Again, this remark deserves some consideration. Why should Iraqis

firing on American troops be tried as criminals and imprisoned or executed? The United States invaded their country. The war never came to an official end. The government of Saddam Hussein did not surrender, it simply went into hiding. US military officials—most recently the top US commander in Iraq, General Ricardo Sanchez—routinely refer to the ongoing conflict as a war. Iraqis captured while engaged in armed resistance to the US occupation are therefore prisoners of war, entitled to treatment as POWs under international law and the Geneva Conventions.

Hoagland, a longtime supporter of exile groups like the Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi, calls for the Pentagon to make use of these forces against the resistance: “[T]he occupation authorities should immediately empower Iraqi militias and other local security forces to help hunt down and deal with the ex-Baathists who form the core of the insurgency.” This amounts to supporting the establishment of an Iraqi version of the Latin American death squads formed under US auspices in the 1970s and 1980s to exterminate leftist guerrillas and political activists.

The *Post* columnist bemoans the US military’s fixation with winning over public opinion in the Sunni-populated region north and west of Baghdad, where the guerrilla attacks have been concentrated. Hoagland argues that the Sunni population as a whole must be made to take responsibility, because they “seem to have willingly become the sea in which the insurgent fish swim.”

He concludes with a piece of sarcasm directed against the military command’s alleged preoccupation with convincing, rather than coercing, the Sunnis: “Emphasizing the wonders of democracy will have much less immediate effect on them than will emphasizing the price they will have to pay for continuing to let the killer fish swim in their midst.”

Hoagland does not spell out in detail what that price will be. For that, and for sheer bloodthirstiness, one has to turn, on the one hand, to the *New York Times*—the erstwhile mouthpiece of establishment liberalism—and, on the other, to the media empire of Rupert Murdoch, the ultra-right proprietor of Fox television and a stable of newspapers worldwide, including the *New York Post*.

In its Sunday, November 16, edition, the *Times* carried a column by Max Boot, also a frequent contributor to the right-wing editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Boot begins by acknowledging that the grievous losses suffered by US forces in Iraq this month “lends credence to critics who see parallels with Vietnam.”

He goes on to assert that the US can “learn important lessons from that earlier war about how to deal with the insurgency.”

In particular, Boot advocates that the US military occupation reprise the methods employed in Operation Phoenix in Vietnam. This CIA-Special Forces operation employed assassination squads that hunted down and killed some 26,000 suspected supporters of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, including political activists, village leaders, workers and farmers.

In addition to mass killing, Boot proposes torture as the appropriate instrument for bringing “democracy” to Iraq. Iraqis, he says, should be recruited for this dirty work.

“Our military—which is court-martialing an Army lieutenant colonel who fired his pistol into the air to scare an Iraqi suspect into divulging details of an imminent attack—may simply be too Boy Scoutish for the rougher side of a dirty war,” writes Boot. “Iraqis who suffered under Saddam Hussein’s tyranny likely feel no such compunctions.”

On November 5, Murdoch’s *New York Post* carried a column by

retired colonel Ralph Peters, a military commentator who is frequently published in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times* and other major dailies.

Peters starts his column with the ritual assertion that the occupation of Iraq is going “vastly better than the media suggests,” then outlines a program of action on the ground that presupposes the opposite—that the US faces an opposition so widespread and powerful that only the bloodiest of measures can be successful.

“First,” Peters argues, “we need to stop pandering to the Sunni-Arab minority that spawns terror and revels in atrocity. Aspects of our occupation policy have been naively one-sided—all carrot, no stick.

“We need to have the guts to give at least one terrorist haven a stern lesson as an example to the others. Fallujah is the obvious choice.

“If the populace continues to harbor our enemies and the enemies of a healthy Iraqi state, we need to impose strict martial law. Instead of lavishing more development funds on the city—bribes that aren’t working—we need to cut back on electricity, ration water, restrict access to the city and organize food distribution through a ration card system.”

This program of starvation and oppression is to be applied to a city of 450,000 people—about the size of Cleveland, Ohio, or Atlanta, Georgia—with predictable consequences in terms of civilian casualties.

Peters also advocates the economic strangulation of the Sunni-dominated region—where about 5 million of Iraq’s 23 million people live—by awarding Iraq’s oil wealth exclusively to the other population groups. The northern oil fields should be handed over to the Kurds, while the southern oil fields go to the Shiites, leaving the Sunnis with “a disarmed, resource-poor” region in the center of the country.

Finally, Peters draws a broader lesson from the experience of Iraq. The United States will undoubtedly be invading and occupying other countries in the future, he says, and it must prepare accordingly.

“We’re overdue to take a lesson from the Romans and the British before us and recognize the value of punitive expeditions,” he declares. “Exemplary punishment may be out of fashion, but it’s one of the most enduringly effective tools of statecraft. Where you cannot be loved, be feared.”

Does Peters advocate the methods the Romans used against Carthage—leveling the city and sowing the soil with salt so that nothing would ever grow again? Or perhaps the tactics of the British against rebellious tribesmen in Iraq in the early 1920s, when Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill ordered the use of warplanes that machine-gunned desert oases and dropped poison gas on the insurgents?

Peters omits from his list of examples a more recent and notorious practitioner of the “punitive expedition”—the Nazi regime in World War II, which carried out atrocity after atrocity in the name of retribution against resistance fighters. But it is to methods like those of the Gestapo and the Waffen SS that the US occupation in Iraq will increasingly turn.



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