

SEP candidate Bill Van Auken: “Iraq war’s wounded—an American tragedy and national disgrace”

Bill Van Auken
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The following is a statement issued by Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Bill Van Auken. It is posted as a pdf file to download and distribute.

Since President Bush taped the interview broadcast February 8 in which he defended the US war in Iraq, at least six more American soldiers have been killed and another 23 have been reported wounded.

Asked about this price in blood paid daily by young working class men and women for a war that, as is now obvious, was launched on the basis of lies, Bush responded with his inimitable blend of sanctimony and cynicism: “Every life is precious. Every person that is willing to sacrifice for this country deserves our praise.”

This pose is one more fraud, and perhaps the most obscene of the lot. The Bush administration has treated the lives of American troops as cannon fodder. Far from rewarding “sacrifice” with “praise,” it has done its best to hide the grim toll in Iraq from the American people.

The number of war wounded constitutes an American tragedy and their treatment by the government a national disgrace that implicates every section of the US establishment.

Because of advances in body armor and battlefield medicine, many soldiers are surviving wounds that would have proved fatal in previous wars. While US troops are dying, on average, at a rate of one per day, the number of daily “wounded in action” has risen to 10. More are injured in what the Pentagon describes as “non-hostile” incidents.

The total number of US military personnel killed in Iraq now stands at 538. As for how many have been wounded, no one really knows. The White House and the Pentagon have concealed the number—estimated at anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000—of personnel medically evacuated from Iraq, and have done their best to prevent the American public from seeing the horrific effects of the war.

Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany is the first stop for many of those who are wounded seriously. “Very few of the people that I see will actually be back to what they used to be,” Captain Justin Barratt, a doctor at the center, recently told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

“Imagine a kid who has lost both arms, asking how he is going to provide for his family,” added Marie Shaw-Fievez, the hospital’s spokeswoman. “It’s gut-wrenching.”

Planeloads of wounded are brought to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington in the dead of night—the after-midnight arrivals are a policy meant to avoid media coverage. Many are then brought to nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where hospital beds are filled to capacity and medical personnel are constantly forced to work overtime.

The hospital has received, on average, about 300 wounded soldiers a month, many of them missing legs and arms, others horribly burned and some having lost their eyesight or suffering from serious brain injuries. The average age of the wounded is 23. For far too many, life has been changed irreparably.

Not only does the administration hide the wounded from the public, it conceals from the soldiers themselves the benefits they have coming to them. The head of Disabled American Veterans, a congressionally chartered organization that aids disabled soldiers, sent an angry letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld last month charging that DAV counselors are being blocked from speaking to the wounded and, as a result, the soldiers are suffering financial and physical hardship.

Some have found themselves warehoused in dilapidated barracks—as emerged at Ft. Stewart in Georgia—or confronted with a military bureaucracy intent on forcing them to accept medical discharges that cut their income in half.

Iraq’s war wounded are the US establishment’s dirty secret. This was brought home by a British Broadcasting Company documentary that aired in the UK February 10 containing wrenching footage of the wounded arriving in the US and receiving treatment at the amputee ward at Walter Reed. “Americans are not allowed to see this,” the British correspondent told his television audience as the camera panned the wounded. What he said is true and the question that must be asked is, why?

The Bush administration has a vested interest in suppressing information on the large numbers of wounded and the terrible maiming of young Americans in Iraq. Public exposure of their plight would only underscore the fact that this administration is

guilty of war crimes, having dragged the American people into an illegal war based on lies about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. The victims of these crimes are both the Iraqi people—with an estimated 10,000 civilians, most of them women and children, having lost their lives—and the soldiers themselves.

The blackout of coverage on the wounded is not merely the product of White House censorship. The media is more than willing to oblige. No television network has considered “embedding” one of its reporters in the emergency room at Landstuhl, where legs and arms are severed daily, or at Walter Reed, where young soldiers are fitted with prosthetic limbs and go through the agonizing process of physical rehabilitation. Having echoed uncritically every lie told by Bush and his aides as the pretext for the war, the media maintains a guilty silence about those who have suffered the consequences.

Similarly, none of the major Democratic candidates—including front-runner Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, who voted to authorize the invasion—has made an issue of the wounded, demanding that they be accounted for and that they receive the benefits they deserve. They are too implicated in this criminal war to break the silence.

The war is not just the work of a misguided clique in the Bush White House and the Pentagon. Whatever the tactical differences over its execution, the US invasion of Iraq was the consensus policy of the American political and corporate establishment.

While lying to the public about WMD and phony terrorist ties, the leadership of both parties, together with the corporate and financial elite, saw the conquest of a defenseless Iraq as a means of gaining control of vast oil reserves and dominating the entire region, thereby furthering their profit interests and ensuring an advantage over their economic rivals.

This predatory scheme has gone badly awry, but those in the US military who are paying the price had no personal stake in it. With few exceptions, they come from the working class, most of them drawn into the military by a shrinking job market and the inability to meet rising college tuition costs.

The vast gulf dividing the soldiers in Iraq from those who conspired to launch the war has been underscored by the controversy over Bush’s National Guard service three decades ago.

Asked about his service record in the interview last weekend, Bush declared: “I wouldn’t denigrate service to the Guard... because there are a lot of really fine people who have served in the National Guard and who are serving in the National Guard today in Iraq.”

The hypocrisy of this remark is truly breathtaking. In 1968, Bush faced being drafted into the army at a time when hundreds were dying every week in Vietnam. He did not oppose the war, he just pulled the strings of wealth and privilege to jump to the head of the line of 100,000 people on a year-and-a-half waiting list and obtain the last spot in a Texas Air National Guard unit,

thereby guaranteeing that he would not see combat. He then failed to show up for duty and managed to arrange a discharge eight months early so that he could enroll at Harvard Business School.

Now, as president, he is sending to the front lines of a bitter guerrilla war in Iraq tens of thousands who joined the National Guard or reserves with the expectation of serving in a part-time, support capacity. They are being wrenched from their jobs, schools and families, in many cases for more than a year, to face being killed or maimed in pursuit of aims and interests that have never been explained to the American people.

The Socialist Equality Party demands that the government-media conspiracy to conceal the tragic toll of death and injury on American soldiers, as well as the Iraqi people, be ended. The broadcast networks, the cable news channels, the daily newspapers with their vast resources and legions of reporters—which were marshaled on a war footing to inundate the public with government war propaganda and lies and present a rose-colored, sanitized version of the war itself—should now be held to account. The American people have a right to demand that they stop the cover-up and tell the truth about the carnage being perpetrated in their name.

There is only one answer to the daily sacrifice of lives and limbs in Iraq—the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from that tortured country. It is for the Iraqi people themselves, not US imperialism, to rebuild their country and determine their future.

The only proper role for the US government is to assist the Iraqis by paying retribution for more than a decade of war, sanctions and colonialist oppression.

At the same time, the billions of dollars in “reconstruction” contracts being handed out to the cronies of Bush and Cheney at companies like Halliburton should be used, instead, to fully fund medical care and health benefits for wounded soldiers and guarantee financial security for their families and the families of those killed in the war.

These policies will not be carried out by the current clique of war conspirators in Washington, nor will they be carried out by the Democrats, should they defeat Bush and the Republicans in November. They can be achieved only through the building of a mass, independent political movement of working people against war and social inequality. The Socialist Equality Party is participating in the 2004 election to lay the political foundations for the emergence of such a movement.



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