

Stop the war on the Iraqi people

The Editorial Board
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Little more than a year after the invasion of Iraq and four months after the capture of Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration has unleashed a new and bloody military offensive against the Iraqi people.

These attacks against civilian population centers constitute war crimes. They are being carried out with the deliberate aim of intimidating the growing popular resistance to the US occupation. The Iraqi dead surely number in the hundreds, though a precise figure is not known. Many hundreds more men, women and children have been wounded as rockets, shells and heavy machine-gun fire rain down on densely populated urban neighborhoods.

American working people must demand an immediate halt to this slaughter and the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. The claim that this violence is justified retaliation for attacks on Iraq's occupiers merits only contempt.

What is unfolding in Iraq is an uprising by the country's most oppressed workers and, in response, a brutal campaign of colonial subjugation. While mouthing phrases about democracy, the US government—Democrats and Republicans alike—is seeking to drown the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi working people in blood.

Both the Shiite slums of Baghdad's Sadr City and the largely Sunni population of Fallujah have been hit with massive firepower from helicopter gunships, tanks and artillery. The casualties include women and children slain by 50-caliber bullets crashing through the walls and doors of their homes. Hospitals have been shelled as well as ambulances. In one case, US forces fired on an ambulance carrying a wounded pregnant woman to the hospital, killing both the woman and her unborn child.

The operation conducted by US Marines in Fallujah has unfolded under a veil of secrecy, with the media barred from the scene. The US military has subjected this town of 500,000 to a siege, barricading all roads in and out. Food deliveries have been halted and people prevented from going to work. Access to Fallujah's main hospital, which is situated across the Euphrates River, has been cut off. A smaller private hospital inside the city has been shelled by tanks and helicopters.

The correspondent from *Aljazeera*, one of the only sources reporting from the besieged city, witnessed a burning car outside the hospital with the body of the driver still inside. He also reported that the residential neighborhood of Golan had been struck by missiles and cluster bombs, with a number of houses destroyed.

Ostensibly, the siege of Fallujah—dubbed Operation Vigilant Resolve—is in retaliation for the killing and mutilation of four American paramilitary operatives in the city last week. The incident, in which large numbers of men and youth participated, laid bare the depth of popular hostility toward the occupation.

In reality, this operation is a further, planned escalation of iron-fisted tactics already introduced by US forces in the week leading up

to the killing of the four American mercenaries. Marines had already blockaded the main roads, in what now appears to have been a dress rehearsal for the present lockdown of the city. The stage is set for house-to-house raids that will inevitably result in the random killing of many more Iraqis.

The simultaneous popular revolt that has spread from Baghdad's impoverished Shiite neighborhoods to Najaf, Nasiriya, Basra and other parts of the predominantly Shiite south is likewise in response to gross provocations on the part of the US occupation authorities.

First, US occupation chief Paul Bremer ordered troops to shut down the weekly newspaper *Al Hawza*, which reflects the views of the Shiite Muslim faction led by Moqtada al-Sadr, the scion of a clerical clan whose prominent members were murdered by the Saddam Hussein regime. Al-Sadr has adopted a posture of militant opposition to the US occupation, winning the support of Shiite workers and youth and the ire of the US authorities. Even as they proclaimed their commitment to democracy, Bremer and his cohorts decided to silence the criticism of *Al Hawza* through the use of armed force.

Then came the arrest of a prominent aide to al-Sadr and the threat to arrest al-Sadr himself—or, in the words of the US military spokesman, to see that he was “hunted down and captured or killed.” These provocative actions and threats, combined with the gunning down of unarmed demonstrators by US-led Iraqi security forces, ignited the pent-up anger of Iraq's Shiite majority against the occupation.

It is difficult to say where the ignorance and arrogance of the Bush administration and the Republican right operatives running the US occupation authority end, and political calculation begins. There are a number of reasons, however, to believe that the US administration has deliberately sought to provoke a confrontation in which it can carry out another set of “shock and awe” military operations aimed at crushing the resistance of the Iraqi people.

There is the looming self-imposed deadline of June 30 for what is described as “handing over sovereignty” or a “transfer of power” to an Iraqi “interim government.” That this government will represent nothing more than an extension of the puppet Governing Council created by the occupation authorities is clear. It will enjoy no credibility, much less popular support, among the Iraqi people. Real power will remain in the hands of the US military and a massive US embassy—planned as the largest in the world, with a staff of over 4,000 functionaries—that is being set up in Baghdad.

Still, Washington is fearful that even the pretense of granting authority to a Quisling regime can trigger popular upheavals that may prove impossible to contain. The present operations are aimed at crushing opposition elements before this political charade takes place.

Related to this deadline are the petty political calculations of the Bush administration, which is anxious to avoid an explosion in Iraq in the immediate run-up to the US elections in November. It hopes somehow to pull off a “transfer of power,” however fraudulent, in

order to stave off mounting opposition to the continued occupation within the US itself.

Finally, there is the question of tactical opportunity. It seems more than fortuitous that fighting has erupted throughout the country at the very moment when US troop strength is at its peak. The massive rotation of US forces—involving the deployment and withdrawal of a combined total of 250,000 troops—is in full swing. At present, there is an overlap that has temporarily increased the number of US soldiers in Iraq from 120,000 to 134,000. The Pentagon and the Bush White House see this increased firepower as an opportunity to escalate their war against the Iraqi people.

More conscious elements within the US ruling elite have for some time been warning that the situation in Iraq is spinning out of control, and urging that the Bush administration carry out more intense repression. Thus, the *Washington Post* published an editorial Tuesday entitled “A Necessary Fight,” which welcomed the eruption of the bloodiest combat since the US military marched into Baghdad a year ago.

“...[T]here may ultimately be a benefit to this confrontation, which began just 88 days before the scheduled transfer of sovereignty from the US-led occupation authority to a new Iraqi government,” the *Post* declared in response to hundreds of Iraqi casualties, and the death of over a dozen US soldiers in a 24-hour period. It described the bloodletting as “a painful but necessary battle” and declared that “US commanders should not hesitate to act quickly and use overwhelming force” to suppress the common revolt of Sunni and Shiite workers and youth.

While acknowledging that the fighting had “a cost in Iraqi and American lives,” the newspaper of record of the Washington establishment insisted that “the alternative—to step back from confrontation with Iraq’s extremists—would invite even worse trouble.”

What is emerging in Iraq is a war of national resistance that has transcended the religious divides that many had predicted would erupt into an internecine civil war. The Iraqi resistance against US occupation is just as legitimate as the struggles waged by the French resistance against German occupation in the 1940s and the liberation struggles that swept the colonial countries in the 1960s and 1970s. The claims of the administration and its apologists that the US is fighting only a small minority of “extremists” and “terrorists” in Iraq will be rejected by all those in the US who are capable of independent and critical thought.

The tactics employed against both the people of Fallujah and the Shiite rebels are reminiscent of the methods of reprisal and collective punishment perfected by the Nazi regime in occupied Europe 60 years ago. They are aimed at intimidating the population as a whole through the use of overwhelming military violence and the policy of exemplary punishment. That such measures can be carried out without provoking even a murmur of protest from the corporate media and the Democratic politicians is a telling measure of the degradation of establishment politics in the US.

The presumptive Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, giving full-throated support to the US colonial enterprise in Iraq, has criticized the Bush administration for seeking to cede authority to the Iraqis too soon. “I think they wanted to get the troops out and get the transfer out of the way as fast as possible without regard to the stability of Iraq,” Kerry declared.

How is that “stability” to be achieved? It requires the ruthless repression of all those who oppose the US domination of Iraq and

believe that the country should be run by the Iraqi people themselves, rather than US proconsuls, generals and corporate profiteers.

The Democratic program amounts to a protracted bloodbath to secure the control of US corporations and banks over the oil wealth of Iraq and the entire region. To prosecute this policy, Kerry and others in the Democratic leadership have repeatedly demanded that the number of US occupation troops be increased, ensuring that US casualties—already reaching nearly 625 dead and many thousands wounded—likewise mount.

This is the policy that is being peddled by those who claim the struggle against war and reaction must be reduced to the slogan of “anybody but Bush”—that is, the replacement of a Republican administration by a Democratic one. It means support for continued war and occupation in Iraq, and the attacks on democratic rights and social conditions that are the inevitable domestic expression of this militarist policy.

The Socialist Equality Party places at the center of its election platform the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and “coalition” troops from Iraq.

American soldiers were sent to war based on the lie that they were protecting the American people from weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and liberating the Iraqi people. They are now being ordered to carry out actions that many know are morally indefensible. It is imperative that they be taken out of harm’s way before more are killed or irreparably maimed, both physically and psychologically.

Against Kerry and other Democrats who claim that “failure is not an option” in Iraq, we insist that “failure” is both inevitable and necessary. A US “success” in the recolonization of Iraq by means of military aggression, mass killings and violent repression would only set the stage for even bloodier imperialist crimes.

A defeat for the US government in Iraq would represent a devastating setback for American imperialism. It would intensify popular opposition to militarism, and thoroughly discredit the neo-colonialist agenda of the US ruling elite.

As the devastating consequences of this “war of choice” become increasingly obvious to the broad mass of working people, the demand for the full exposure and punishment of those responsible for this criminal enterprise will grow.

Against the program of militarism, global hegemony and colonial conquest supported by Democrats and Republicans alike, the SEP advocates a socialist foreign policy that would guarantee the right of the working people of the Middle East to determine their own political destiny and control the natural resources of their region.

The SEP and its presidential and vice presidential candidates, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence, demand that the vast resources now being squandered to subjugate and slaughter people in Iraq and elsewhere be utilized to raise the living standards of working people in the US and the rest of the world, and create the conditions for genuine worldwide cooperation and social equality.



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