

Marines pull back from Fallujah: a debacle for American imperialism

Patrick Martin
4 May 2004

The decision by the Bush administration and the Pentagon to pull back the Marines besieging the city of Fallujah is a devastating setback for the US occupation regime in Iraq. Faced with the prospect of house-to-house combat against an insurgency rooted in the city, the US government apparently decided that the cost of retaking the city, both militarily and politically, was too great.

The withdrawal was first announced on Thursday, April 29, when Marine commanders on the scene said they were turning over responsibility for patrolling Fallujah to a group of former Iraqi generals, several of them natives of the city. These officers were discharged last year when the US occupation regime disbanded the Iraqi army. They had been denied reemployment in the new US-run Iraqi security forces because they previously held high commands under Saddam Hussein and were members of the Baath Party.

While the establishment of a Sunni Muslim “Fallujah Protection Army” was presented as a face-saving alternative to a full-scale assault on the city by the Marines, there is no question that this outcome to the month-long standoff at Fallujah has emboldened the resistance to the US occupation. Press reports from the city cited residents dancing in the streets and guerrilla fighters declaring victory as the Marines abandoned their positions on the northwest side of the city.

The *Washington Post* reported: “As the militiamen drove through Fallujah in trucks and congregated on deserted street corners, residents flashed V-for-victory signs and mosques broadcast celebratory messages proclaiming triumph over the Americans. ‘We won,’ said one of the militiamen, a former soldier who gave his name only as Abu Abdullah, meaning the father of Abdullah. ‘We didn’t want the Americans to enter the city and we succeeded.’”

One resident who spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* described the uprising as a popular revolt against the occupying power. “Every Fallujan who was able to carry weapons participated,” he said. “All of us are mujahedin. No masks will be used anymore by the mujahedin. We are struggling openly. Our relationship with the new Iraqi commander and

his people is very good. They did not come on the back of the American tanks. They are our sons.” The *Times* reporter cited a sign hanging on the gate of a mosque that captured the mood. It read, “We are the soldiers of Muhammad and not the soldiers of Saddam. We love death as you love life.”

The abandonment of the siege of Fallujah came abruptly after weeks of increasingly blood-curdling threats from the Bush administration that it would reestablish the authority of the CPA in the city by killing all those who had taken up arms. The British newspaper *Guardian* reported that one faction of the Bush administration wanted to “level” the city, while others argued that such action would make Iraq ungovernable and provoke anti-American uprisings in other Arab countries.

On April 24, only five days before the withdrawal, Bush went to his Camp David retreat to preside over a videoconference of top national security officials on the plans to storm the city. Out of this meeting came a decision to hold off the attack and try to establish joint patrols of US Marines and Iraqi security forces. This was to begin Tuesday, April 27, but was put off repeatedly and finally abandoned. In the meantime, there were repeated air strikes on the city from US warplanes and helicopter gunships.

As late as Wednesday, April 28, White House officials were comparing Fallujah to the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War, declaring that it was necessary to make an example of the city, exterminating its defenders in a show of superior force, in order to prevent the American people from drawing the conclusion that the US military intervention was a failure. One top military official told the *Los Angeles Times*, “When we go in, you’ll see, we’re going to go in with heavy armor, and we’re going to kill people.”

The next day, the agreement was struck between Marine commander David Conway and the group of Iraqi generals, and a day later, Friday, April 30, the first Iraqi commander, former major general Jassim Mohammed Saleh, entered the city dressed in his Hussein-era uniform, accompanied by a few hundred Iraqi volunteers, and greeted by cheers. The Marine command announced that the new force would

“assume responsibility for security and stability” by manning checkpoints in the city formerly held by US troops.

Two Marine battalions that have withstood the worst of the fighting in Fallujah abandoned buildings they had taken from the insurgents and bulldozed impromptu fortifications they had thrown up during the three-week siege. By the end of the weekend, they had withdrawn more than five miles from their front-line positions, despite the claims of US spokesmen that they were merely “repositioning.”

The rapid changes in tactics and policy seemed to be largely improvised and uncoordinated, with conflicting announcements emanating from the Marine commanders outside Fallujah, from the CPA in Baghdad, the Pentagon and the White House. It was not clear at what level the decision was first made to make a deal with the former Hussein commanders and turn over authority in Fallujah to them.

According to the analysis by the *Washington Post*—a fervent supporter of the war—the decision was the product of a near panic in the Bush administration. As the newspaper described it May 1, “The decision to turn to former Iraqi army generals to help regain control of Fallujah, for instance, took place under confusing circumstances, with military officials in Iraq announcing terms that officials in Washington had yet to review. It also came against the backdrop of rising Iraqi anger at the U.S.-led occupation and televised images of possible psychological and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers. To some analysts, the administration left the impression it was grasping at alternatives, with little sense of how this new tactic fit into the larger strategy or of its possible pitfalls. In much of the world, in fact, the agreement was first described as a retreat by Americans in the face of stubborn resistance by insurgent forces.”

Pentagon officials described the new arrangement as a minimal change, the handing over of a few guard posts from the Marines to the new Iraqi military force, even as thousands of Marines were pulling up stakes and moving out.

On Sunday, in interviews on several television news programs, General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, flatly denied suggestions that the Marines had pulled back from Fallujah and condemned the press reporting from the city as totally inaccurate. But according to the *Post*, “In fact, two Marine battalions—the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment—have pulled out of positions in or near the city. The 1st Battalion vacated its forward operating base in a beverage factory inside the city and moved to a base five miles outside the city on Friday.”

Some local American officials named Saleh as their choice

to run the Fallujah Protection Force, evidently without even clearing the selection with Washington. In his Sunday television appearances, Myers announced that Saleh would not be in overall charge but would play only a secondary role. His selection had come from “the bottom up,” Myers added. “Now we have to have a policy to catch up with what is happening on the ground.”

One US military official expressed exasperation over this reversal, telling the *Post*, “We’ve just told him he can form a brigade and take over the city. Now we’re telling him that he has to step aside? Do we just expect him to go home?” The next day, the Pentagon announced that another ex-Hussein general, former chief of military intelligence Muhammad Latif, would be in command in Fallujah, with Saleh in a subordinate position.

Meanwhile, Saleh himself denied that there were any foreign fighters in Fallujah—the principal pretext for the US military siege. He said the violence in the city was caused by the US presence: “The reasons for the resistance go back to the American provocations, the raids, and abolishing the army, which made Iraqis join the resistance,” he told Reuters.

An aide to Saleh told the press, “The only fighters are the Fallujans. There are no Arabs, and if there were Arabs it is not a shame upon the city of Islam. The Americans brought different nationalities—British, Spanish, Salvadorans, Ukrainians. Is it acceptable for them and rejected for us?”

The agreement worked out in Fallujah, however shaky and transitory, makes nonsense of the claims by the Bush administration that the resistance to the US domination of Iraq comes from a relative handful of terrorists or “former regime elements,” rather than reflecting mass nationalist opposition to the occupation.

US officers conceded that many of those who took up arms against the Marines might now become part of the Fallujah Protection Army, receiving arms and other supplies from the Pentagon. If the political situation in the city blows up again—which is universally expected—this war materiel could well be put to use in the next round of struggle against the occupation forces.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact