

Australian SEP public meeting:

Iraq has become a military and political debacle for the US

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The following speech was delivered by James Conachy, a staff writer for the World Socialist Web Site and a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, to a public meeting on the Iraq war, held in Sydney on May 30.

Just over one year ago, on May 1, 2003, US President George Bush strutted the flight deck of a US aircraft carrier and triumphantly declared victory in the Iraq war.

As we meet, there are few signs of triumphalism in US ruling circles and none but the most self-deluded are talking any more about victory.

Throughout this week, there have been visible signs of panic in Washington. The Bush administration is confronted with Iraqi resistance it cannot break, international political isolation, the ongoing exposure of American torture in Iraqi prisons, a scathing denunciation of US human rights abuses by Amnesty International, and a president who is completely out of his depth.

To give you a flavour of what is being discussed in US military circles about the state of affairs in Iraq, I would like to read some extracts from a comment on May 13 by William S. Lind, chief defence analyst for the right-wing Centre for Cultural Conservatism.

"America needs to make sure it has plans for a fighting withdrawal from Iraq... The growing probability is that we will be driven out by a general uprising, an intifada in which every American will be the target of every Iraqi and our boys and girls will have to fight their way out in a scene like that which faced Gordon in the Sudan. It's not a pleasant prospect.

"It means thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of American and 'coalition' casualties, many times more Iraqi casualties, and one of history's more memorable defeats, right up there with Syracuse, Waterloo and Stalingrad. The aftershocks will be severe, as regimes tumble from Pakistan, through the Persian Gulf to Egypt, to Britain, and America itself. "You can look forward to seeing the Dow at 3,000, if not 300."

Other warnings that the US faces defeat in Iraq, admittedly not quite as catastrophic, have been made by a number of senior US military officers, including retired General Anthony Zinni.

At the heart of their despair is the reality of the situation in Iraq. The invasion last March was underpinned by a series of assumptions that have, to put it mildly, been exposed as absurd.

The most absurd was the belief in the White House, among the war planners and the US media, that taking over Iraq would be, as one Bush supporter put it, a "cakewalk".

The overwhelming force of the US military would "shock and awe" the Iraqi people into submission within weeks. In a matter of months, it was asserted, just 50,000 or so troops would be needed to carry forward the US agenda of establishing a puppet regime and setting in motion the plunder of Iraq's oil resources. The bulk of the US military would be able to move on to the next target in the "war on terror".

There was never any doubt about the ability of the US military to slaughter the Iraqi army; to reduce Iraqi cities to rubble; to inflict mayhem and terror. But there was also never any doubt that the Iraqi people were going to resist and that, sooner or later, the resistance would go beyond guerilla warfare and assume the dimensions of an insurrection.

In the final week of March 2004, the Bush administration and its occupation authority in Iraq took two decisions that unleashed what I think can accurately be called the initial stages of the Iraqi uprising against the US occupation.

Firstly, on March 28, the offices of the newspaper of anti-occupation Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr were raided in Baghdad and the journal declared illegal.

Secondly, the Bush administration seized upon the killing of four American mercenaries in the city of Fallujah on March 30 to launch long-prepared plans for a massive US assault on the city, which, since Iraq was invaded, has been a centre of the resistance. Thousands of marines put the city under siege, trapping as many as 300,000 people inside.

As was later made clear in the statements by American commanders, the intention of the assault on Fallujah was to inflict such death and destruction on its people that it would become a symbol, not of resistance, but of what happens to those who stand in the way of US imperialism.

The same Nazi-like conception of reprisal and terror lay behind the crackdown on the movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr.

The US authority believed that banning Sadr's newspaper would provoke a confrontation with his several thousand-strong Mahdi Army militia, and it would be easily crushed. By drowning Sadr's movement in blood, the Bush administration believed the more established and less militant Shiite leaders would be intimidated enough to drop their opposition to aspects of the US plans to install a puppet regime on June 30.

Instead, the coinciding attacks on the most militant factions of Sunni and Shiite opposition have turned into a military and political debacle for the US.

By the night of April 4, thousands of Iraqi Shiite youth had taken up arms in the working class suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, the holy Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala, in Kut, Nasiriyah, and the British-controlled cities of Amara and Basra. They seized government buildings, took over city streets, and forced US and allied forces to retreat into fortified compounds.

In Fallujah, the attempt by US marines to move into the city in force on April 6 was blocked by the most intense urban combat the American military has faced since the Vietnam War. Despite hundreds of casualties and constant US bombing, the Iraqi defenders held their ground.

The class composition of those fighting the occupation is undeniable. Above all, it is the working class and urban poor. It is this social layer that

has suffered the greatest under both the once-US-backed Baathist regime and the 13 years of US wars, bombing raids and economic sanctions. It is also the class with everything to gain, and nothing to lose, from the defeat of the occupation.

An Iraqi named Abbas, in the Sadr City suburb of Baghdad, articulated the sentiment of Iraq's oppressed in a comment to the *Boston Globe* this week. Bush, he said, has "brought us death, deliberate killing, rape, sewerage on the streets, poverty and unemployment". The saying in Sadr City since the invasion is that the student [Hussein] has left, and the master [the US] has come.

The outcome of the first stage of the uprising is more than 200 Americans dead and nearly 2,000 wounded. Iraqi casualties over the past seven weeks are unknown. The US military doesn't count them. My rough estimate from wire reports is that up to 2,000 fighters and over 1,500 civilians have been killed, and as many as 5,000 fighters and civilians wounded.

The US military has demonstrated that it can carry out war crimes in Iraq that rival its conduct in Vietnam and make comparisons with the Nazis entirely justified. Entire suburbs of Fallujah and Karbala lie in ruin.

An uneasy form of truce exists today in much of Iraq, following a series of tactical retreats by the US military to try and pre-empt what William S. Lind warned of—a general uprising it cannot deal with.

In Fallujah, Karbala and now Najaf, the US military has been ordered to step back from an all-out offensive. Sadr City in Baghdad is also a no-go area for American troops.

This is not because of moral qualms in the White House about slaughtering thousands of Iraqis. Bush administration leaders have proven themselves capable of that. It is due to fear of the political consequences, not only in Iraq, but across the Middle East and in the US itself.

The uprising has utterly shattered the central strand of the Bush administration's propaganda to the American people: the claim that the US presence in Iraq would be viewed as "liberation" and had the support of the Iraqi people.

The extent of Iraqi opposition has exposed the constant lies that those fighting the US are only isolated leftovers of Saddam Hussein's regime, Islamic extremists or foreign terrorists.

The uprising has also undermined the self-serving argument that the occupation is the only thing preventing rival religious and ethnic factions in Iraq launching a fratricidal civil war against one another.

The majority of the population—both Sunni and Shiite—is clearly united in opposition to the US occupation. Baghdad was shut down for three days by a general strike called in support of Sadr and Fallujah—the two symbols of Iraqi defiance. Joint Sunni-Shiite rallies of over 200,000 were held at a major Sunni mosque. Thousands of Shiites donated blood and food to send to Fallujah. Shiite and Sunni fighters have joined forces to launch constant attacks on US supply lines.

Far from the resistance having no support, it is the occupying power that is isolated.

Moqtada al-Sadr now registers 68 percent support from Iraqis polled in April, up from 2 percent before the uprising. The poll was conducted by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies.

Every institution the US authority has created to give it a base of support has broken apart under the pressure of the popular uprising. In virtually every area, the US-recruited army, police and civil defence militia either refused to fight against the rebellion or, in many cases, joined it. The US has even faced resignations and open criticism from its own handpicked Iraqi Governing Council.

One of the most significant aspects of the uprising, however, is the way in which it has undermined the consistent attempts by the Bush administration to portray those fighting US imperialism in the Middle East as universally anti-American and a threat to the American people. It sought to link the Iraqi resistance with the reactionary terrorist ideology of

organisations like Al Qaeda.

The WWSW took serious note of the April 7 appeal that was made Moqtada al-Sadr.

As the US military was unleashing jet-bombers, helicopter gunships, artillery and tanks against civilian areas in Baghdad, Fallujah and other cities, he did not call for revenge attacks on the American people.

Instead, Sadr called, and I quote, "upon the American people to stand beside your brothers, the Iraqi people, who are suffering an injustice by your rulers and the occupying army, and to help them in the transfer of power to honest Iraqis".

In greetings to a meeting of the SEP in Australia on April 10, the chairman of the WWSW International Editorial Board, David North, made the following observation:

"This appeal must reflect a new awareness among the Iraqi masses that American imperialism is not a monolithic force, and that the United States is torn by internal social divisions. It also expresses a realisation that the Iraqi people must seek support beyond the borders of their own country. This development in consciousness was already anticipated in the mass international anti-war demonstrations of February 2003."

At every point, the ambitions of the Bush administration to subjugate Iraq have been thwarted by two forces: the resistance of the Iraqi people and the global opposition to the neo-colonial agenda of the American ruling class in the Middle East.

We are considering a complex interaction of processes, but the Iraqi people have known since March 20, 2003, that a significant proportion of the American and world population are utterly opposed to the aggression that has been unleashed against them.

There is great confusion in the international working class. But masses of people have passed through enormous experiences over the past several decades and they have learnt something from them. Large sections of the population are totally alienated from the political establishment and view it with distrust.

Tens of millions of people in the US, Australia and around the world did not accept the lies of Bush, Blair and Howard that the war was being launched because Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction". They did not accept that an oil-rich and strategic country was being invaded because the American government wanted to "liberate" its people from a dictator.

The demonstrations that preceded the invasion, particularly the unprecedented show of international human solidarity by over 10 million people around the world on February 15-16, demonstrated the existence of mass anti-imperialist sentiment.

The Spanish election result this March verified that the passions aroused by the war and the hostility to government lies have not gone away. Now, from South Korea, to India, to Australia, the forces of right-wing reaction are on the back foot due to the growing intervention of the masses into political life.

The knowledge that a global anti-imperialist movement exists and sympathises with their struggle must have been a source of inspiration and encouragement for the determined and undeniably heroic resistance of the Iraqi people over the past several months.

American imperialism is not going to simply walk away from Iraq due to military setbacks or the incompetence of the current occupants of the White House and Pentagon command. Many political shifts and surprises are possible over the coming months, but what will not change is the desperate economic and social crisis of US capitalism that has driven it onto the road of global conquest.

The might of the US military, however, is not the most decisive factor in world politics. The struggle of the working class and oppressed is. It can both defeat imperialism and bring about revolutionary social change, providing it has the necessary leadership and perspective.



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