

# The New York Times and the reservists in Iraq who said “No”

Rick Kelly, Jerry White  
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With its lead editorial Tuesday, “When Soldiers Say No,” the *New York Times* has signaled its approval, in advance, for the punishment of 18 US army reservists in Iraq who last week refused to carry out what one described as a “suicide mission.”

On October 13, the soldiers from the 343rd Quartermaster Company, based in South Carolina, rejected an order to drive seven unarmored fuel tankers through southern and central Iraq, where resistance fighters have repeatedly attacked US convoys.

Family members reported that the reservists were arrested and detained, though the military claims they are no longer in custody. All of those involved could face severe disciplinary measures, including loss of rank, discharge from the army—with the attendant denial of veterans’ benefits—and possible imprisonment for up to five years.

“Soldiers in combat cannot pick and choose their missions, no matter how grave the risks they are asked to face,” the *Times* editorial declared. “Legal direct orders must be obeyed.”

The *Times* acknowledged that reserve troops, including the rebellious supply unit, had been sent into “counterinsurgency combat” without sufficient training or armor. It further noted that the soldiers’ repeated appeals to commanding officers had fallen on deaf ears.

Nevertheless, the newspaper concluded: “None of these points lessen the seriousness of uniformed soldiers’ refusal to carry out legal orders. An Army where discipline breaks down can neither accomplish its mission nor protect its own troops. Once the facts have been established, the men and women who refused the mission can expect to be held accountable.”

For precisely what “mission” are these men and women supposed to sacrifice life and limb? The *Times* chooses not to say. But by charging soldiers who

disobey with undermining the “mission,” and demanding that they be punished, the newspaper reveals once again that, whatever its criticisms of Bush’s conduct of the war, it supports the imperialist enterprise in Iraq.

The bulk of the editorial is a recitation of what the newspaper terms “catastrophic” missteps and failures by the White House and the Pentagon. While these criticisms are issued under the guise of sympathy and concern for the troops, the clear implication is that the drive to crush the Iraqi resistance must be intensified—with more US troops, and more deaths and mutilations of both Americans and Iraqis.

What the *Times* will not say is that the war itself is a flagrant violation of international law and the democratic rights of the American people. It is a crime, and those who planned and launched it are criminals—not those who resist orders that evince indifference and contempt for the lives of ordinary soldiers.

Every rationale given to the troops, and to the American people as a whole, for the invasion and occupation of Iraq has been exposed as a lie. So too was the claim that the invaders would be greeted as heroes and liberators by the Iraqi masses. When that fairy tale exploded, a new lie was rolled out—that those opposing the US occupation were a small group of Baathist “dead-enders,” Al Qaeda terrorists, and common criminals. This fiction was combined with a new ex-post-facto pretext for the ongoing slaughter—the US was bringing democracy to the people of Iraq and the entire Middle East.

The reality is that the resistance has massive popular support, and that the US-installed interim government is despised by Iraqis—Sunni and Shia alike. Far from “liberating” the country, the invasion has caused a

catastrophic decline in the living conditions of ordinary Iraqis and subjected them to a new authoritarian regime, backed by American tanks, war planes and bullets.

There is a growing awareness in the ranks of the US army of the gulf that separates the reality of their daily experiences and the propaganda emanating from Washington. Thousands of troops sense that they have been lied to, and the suspicion is growing that the authors of the war have ulterior motives that have nothing to do with democracy, peace, or the safety of the American people.

Moreover, the Bush administration's recklessness and criminality in Iraq and Afghanistan have serious and immediate implications for the safety of the soldiers. Many are undoubtedly aware that the government's flouting of the Geneva Conventions, and its use of torture at Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Guantanamo, and other military prisons, have exposed them to similarly brutal treatment should they be taken prisoner.

Throughout history, it has often been the case that the opening stages of large-scale breakdowns in military discipline were marked by soldiers questioning their superiors' competency and capacity to prosecute the war. When troops lose confidence in their commanders' leadership ability, broader issues concerning the very nature of the conflict invariably follow.

The reservists' defiance foreshadows a deeper radicalization in the ranks. Future protests will inevitably occur on a larger scale, and on a more explicitly political basis. The ruling elite—and the *Times*' editors—are acutely aware of this, which is why the case of the reservists is being treated with such nervousness and apprehension.

The *Times*' expressions of sympathy for the plight of US soldiers in Iraq are utterly hypocritical. As of this writing, more than 1,100 have been killed in combat and thousands more have been wounded, many of them maimed and crippled for life. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed, and thousands more will die in the coming assaults on Fallujah and other centers of Iraqi resistance.

There is only one way to take the US soldiers out of harm's way and stop the American slaughter of Iraqis: to immediately and unconditionally withdraw all US

and foreign forces and allow the Iraqi people to settle their own affairs.

The *Times*, which speaks for the so-called "liberal" sections of the American political and corporate establishment, stands opposed to such a course. On the question of Iraq, as well as the more general goal of establishing US global hegemony, the differences within the US ruling elite, and between its two major parties—no matter how sharp or bitter—are over tactics and means, not over principles or ends.

That is why the *Times* comes down on the side of the military brass and against those soldiers who dare to resist and say "No."



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