

Discontent rife in US military ranks

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With the US election just weeks away, some reports in the US media have provided a glimpse into the discontent among American troops in Iraq. Young soldiers, many barely out of high school, are seething with anger over being used to police the indefinite occupation of the country, against the will of both the Iraqi and the American people.

On October 10, in a remarkable story headlined “For Marines, a Frustrating Fight”, the *Washington Post* published the comments of a group of soldiers from the First Battalion, Second Marine Regiment, who are stationed in Iskandariyah, a predominantly Shiite city 50 km southwest of Baghdad. Anti-occupation cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army militia, as well as other resistance groups, have considerable support in the area and fighting has been more or less continuous since the invasion.

The marines spoke freely to the *Post* about the realities of fighting against Iraqi guerrillas who can rely on popular support. They expressed resentment over the way the war is being reported in the US and over the lies used to justify the invasion in the first place.

The Bush administration’s lie that has had perhaps the most demoralising effect on the soldiers was the claim they would be treated as “liberators”. Instead, they confront a civilian population that despises them as invaders and is providing a constant stream of recruits to the armed resistance.

Lance Corporal Carlos Perez, 20, stated: “Sometimes I see no reason why we’re here.... We’re supposed to be looking for Al Qaeda. They’re the ones who are supposedly responsible for the September 11 attacks. This has no connection at all to September 11 because this war started just by telling us about all the nuclear warheads over here.... I’ve only been here two months, but every time you go out people give you bad looks and it just seems like everybody wants to shoot you.”

Lance Corporal Edward Elston, 22, said: “I feel we’re going to be here for years and years and years.... I think it’s going to get a lot worse. It’s going to be like a

Palestinian-type deal. We’re going to stop being a policing presence and then start being an occupying presence.... We’re always going to be here.”

Lance Corporal Jonathon Snyder, 22, said: “Every day you read the articles in the States where it’s like ‘Oh, it’s getting better and better’ but when you’re here you know it’s worse every day.”

Private Kyle Maio, 19, told the *Post*: “Stuff’s going on here but they [the government and media] won’t flat out say it. They can’t get into it.”

An element in the anger is the steadily mounting toll of dead and wounded. Far from casualties decreasing as time goes on, more Americans were killed in August and September than during the invasion itself. Of the 1,100 marines in the First Battalion, Second Marine Regiment, four have been killed and 102 wounded since it arrived in Iraq on July 28—a casualty rate approaching 10 percent.

Since March 2003, at least 1,084 US troops have been killed and 7,532 wounded in Iraq. Of those, at least 160 have had limbs amputated, while at least 200 have lost all or part of their sight. On top of the combat wounded, a further 15,000 American troops are believed to have been medically evacuated from Iraq for non-combat reasons, including 1,500 for psychological problems. There are also confirmed cases of soldiers suffering the side-effects of exposure to depleted uranium.

Facing death, injury or contamination every day, a young marine dismissed a question from the *Washington Post* as to whether they were afraid of retribution for speaking out: “We don’t give a crap. What are they are going to do, send us to Iraq?”

Other soldiers and marines denounced the situation in Iraq in an article published on September 21 by the *Christian Science Monitor*.

A soldier fighting in the Najaf area reported: “Nine out of 10 of the people I talk to, it wouldn’t matter who ran against Bush, they’d vote for them. People are so fed up with Iraq and fed up with Bush.” Another said: “Nobody I know wants Bush. This whole war was based on lies.”

A marine declared: “We shouldn’t be here. There was

no reason for invading this country in the first place. We just came here and killed a lot of innocent people. I don't enjoy killing women and children. It's not my thing."

Many soldiers and marines have seen Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and are discussing it. One marine told the *Monitor*: "Everyone's watching it. It's shaping a lot of people's image of Bush." Another declared: "Bush didn't want to attack bin Laden because he was doing business with bin Laden's family."

Moore's latest book, *Will They Ever Trust Again*, is a compilation of letters and e-mails from US soldiers denouncing the Bush administration and documenting the atrocities that they have been ordered to commit against the Iraqi people.

One Iraqi estimate is that as many as 37,000 civilians were killed by the actions of the occupation just between March 20, 2003 and the end of October 2003. The US-installed Iraqi Health Ministry estimated that 3,487 Iraqis were killed and 13,720 injured between April and September this year, with two thirds of these casualties being caused by the US-led occupation forces.

As many as 350,000 American military personnel have already served in some capacity in Iraq since March 2003 and organisations of Iraq veterans and military families opposed to the war are growing in numbers.

Mike Hoffman, a former marine artilleryman who fought in Iraq, took an honourable discharge in August 2003 and helped co-found *Iraq Veterans Against the War* [www.ivaw.net] this July. He told the latest edition of *Mother Jones*: "The reasons for the war were wrong. They were lies. There were no WMDs. Al Qaeda was not there. And it was evident we couldn't force democracy on people by force of arms ...

"You realise that the people to blame for this aren't the ones you are fighting. It's the people who put you in this situation in the first place. You realize you wouldn't be in this situation if you hadn't been lied to. Soldiers are slowly coming to that conclusion. Once that becomes widespread, the resentment of the war is going to grow even more."

Close links exist between IVAW and organisations like *Bring Them Home Now!* [www.bringthemhomenow.com] and *Military Families Speak Out* [www.mfso.org], a network of some 1,700 military families, including a number whose loved ones were killed in Afghanistan or Iraq. There are also close ties between the anti-Iraq war groups and the veterans associations from the first 1991 Gulf War, who are still seeking explanations for the illnesses that affect tens of thousands of former US

troops.

The common sentiment among the veterans and military families is for the immediate end to the illegal occupation of Iraq. The IVAW states its mission as "saving lives and ending the violence in Iraq by an immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces. We also believe that the governments that sponsored these wars are indebted to the men and women that were forced to fight them and must give their Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen the benefits that are owed to them upon their return home."

This places them in opposition not only to the Bush administration, but also to the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate John Kerry, who has repeatedly declared any government he heads will continue the occupation of Iraq. In the first presidential debate Kerry stressed: "I'm not talking about leaving [Iraq]. I'm talking about winning".

Members of the armed forces, military families and veterans who are opposed to the war should seriously study the Socialist Equality Party's election statement and support the SEP's campaign in the 2004 US elections. The SEP and its presidential, vice-presidential and congressional candidates are their only genuine voice.

Only the SEP is contesting the election with the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from Iraq and the prosecution of the Bush administration for its war crimes. Above all, the SEP campaign is aimed at establishing the political independence of the working class and building the mass socialist party needed to overcome the cause of militarism and colonialism.

As the SEP election statement points out: "A fundamental and progressive shift in American policy requires not merely a change in the ruling personnel, but rather a social revolution that puts an end to the domination of the American people by corporate interests, massive private wealth and the profit system itself."



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