

US media applauds destruction of Fallujah

David Walsh

17 November 2004

Not a single major voice has been raised in the American media against the ongoing destruction of Fallujah. While much of the world recognizes something horrifying has occurred, the US press does not bat an eye over the systematic leveling of a city of 300,000 people.

A journalist for the *Times* (London) described the scene the night the US onslaught began: “The districts comprising Fallujah’s perimeter—where most of the insurgents are concentrated—were already largely in ruins. The crumbling remains of houses and shell-pocked walls reminded me of my home town Beirut in the 1980s at the height of Lebanon’s civil war.... I began to count out loud as the bombs tumbled to the ground with increasingly monotonous regularity. There were 38 in the first half-hour alone. The bombing continued in waves until 5:15 a.m. as the American forces softened up their targets.”

And now? Buildings have been destroyed by the hundreds, corpses buried under many of them. A *Christian Science Monitor* reporter observes: “Some districts reeked from the sickening odor of rotting flesh, a stench too powerful to be swept away by a brisk breeze coming in from the sandy plain surrounding the city 40 miles west of Baghdad.

“A week of ground combat by Marines and some Iraqi troops, supported by tanks and attack helicopters, added to the destruction in a city where the homes and businesses for about 300,000 people are packed into an area a little less than 2 miles wide and a little more than 2 miles long. ... Cats and dogs scamper along streets littered with bricks, broken glass, toppled light poles, downed power lines, twisted traffic barriers and spent cartridges. Walls are full of bullet holes. Marines have blown holes in walls and knocked down doors to search homes and shops. Dead Iraqis still lay out in the open Monday.”

For all intents and purposes, the US military declared any male in Fallujah and any family unlucky enough to be caught in the hail of deadly fire legitimate targets for death. We will perhaps never know how many civilians have been slaughtered by US forces.

The chief United Nations human rights official, Louise Arbour, has called for an investigation of abuses, including the disproportionate use of force and the targeting of civilians. Arbour claimed that all violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws should be investigated, including “the deliberate targeting of civilians, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, the killing of injured persons and the use of human shields.” The American media either ignores or brushes this aside.

In none of the US media commentaries is there a single expression of concern about not merely the moral, but the legal issues involved in the attack on Fallujah. The American military operation in the city is an illegal act of aggression in an illegal, aggressive war.

As Marjorie Cohn, professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, executive vice president of the National Lawyers Guild and the US representative to the executive committee of the American Association of Jurists, has noted, the attack began with an act contravening international law: “They [US forces] stormed and occupied the Fallujah General Hospital, and have not agreed to allow doctors and ambulances to go inside the main part of the city to help the wounded, in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions.”

Cohn continues: “Torture, inhuman treatment, and willful killing are

grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, treaties ratified by the United States. Grave breaches of Geneva are considered war crimes under our federal War Crimes Act of 1996. American nationals who commit war crimes abroad can receive life in prison, or even the death penalty if the victim dies. Under the doctrine of command responsibility, a commander can be held liable if he knew or should have known his inferiors were committing war crimes and he failed to prevent or stop them. ... Bush’s aggressive war against the people of Iraq promises to kill many more American soldiers and untold numbers of Iraqis. Nuremberg prosecutor Justice [Robert] Jackson labeled the crime of aggression ‘the greatest menace of our times.’ More than 50 years later, his words still ring true.”

There has been nothing like the attack on Fallujah since the Nazi invasion and occupation of much of the European continent—the shelling and bombing of Warsaw in September 1939, the terror bombing of Rotterdam in May 1940. All the talk about precision bombing in Iraq is dust thrown in the public’s eyes. The purpose of the devastation in Fallujah is to terrorize the Iraqi people and the entire population of the Middle East. Large numbers of people have been killed in the assault on the city.

Nowhere in the American media do you find a word of protest. No one asks for verification that the city is being held “hostage” by criminals and “foreign terrorists.” No one questions an operation to “root out” a relative handful of terrorists that requires razing a city to the ground.

It is necessary to put this on record. In the future, people will ask: what did you do and say while Fallujah was being destroyed? If readers can find major newspaper or television editorials denouncing the murderous attack, by all means, send them in to the WSWS. We have searched in vain.

This is what we found.

The *New York Times* editors complain that the onslaught in Fallujah “is not the textbook way to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign” and worry that the city’s decimation may be a “very costly victory,” because of the hostility it will breed in the Sunni population, but never question the morality or legality of the attack.

The *Times*’ real concern is for the fraudulent elections scheduled for January, designed to give the occupation a pseudo-democratic veneer. “Insurgents have now stepped up their attacks in the larger city of Ramadi, 30 miles west of Falluja,” the editors write, “and have established a new base in the northern Iraq metropolis of Mosul. It is critical to keep these armed fighters from disrupting the Iraqi elections planned for January.”

The editors of the *Washington Post* too are nervous about the long-term prospects in Iraq, but assert that “the prospective restoration of government rule and the elimination of an open haven for terrorists [in Fallujah] is a significant step forward, provided that rule can be sustained and bolstered with reconstruction and participation in upcoming national elections.” The *Post* transmits to its readers, without any proof whatsoever, the claim that “reported casualties so far have been relatively light.”

Along the same lines, the *Boston Globe* criticizes Bush administration policy for making the attack on Fallujah necessary, but signs on to the

operation: “Given everything that has gone wrong in the intervening period—after all the mistakes of omission and commission made by President Bush and his advisers—Fallujah could not be left as a sanctuary and spawning ground for thousands of insurgents who aspire either to restore a Saddamist police state or to impose a harsh Islamist theocracy.”

After its initial hesitation, the *Globe* warms to the task: “For the taking of Fallujah to be successful, there must be enough well-trained and reliable Iraqi security forces to keep the dispersed insurgent bands from filtering back in. Then other cities in the Sunni area will have to be cleared one at a time of Ba’athist and Islamist reactionaries.”

The cynical position of these “liberal” newspapers was summed up in the stance of the *Los Angeles Times*, whose editors comment: “Iraqi insurgents based in Fallouja presented U.S. military forces with two choices, one bad and the other worse. Marines opted for the bad one Monday, assaulting the city with the understanding that civilians as well as fighters would be killed and Arab passions would be inflamed far outside Fallouja and Iraq. The worse option was to do nothing, cede the town to the guerrillas and make it a model for other cities in Iraq.”

For whom is this a “worse option”? The Iraqi people, the American people—or the US ruling elite and its military? While carping about this or that tactical issue, the liberal media establishment makes clear that it easily prefers the colonial-style occupation of Iraq—and all that goes with it, including the destruction of Fallujah—to its alternative, the defeat and forced withdrawal of American forces.

We feel obliged to ask: is there a limit beyond which the editors of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe* would not find halting US military operations in Iraq the “worse option”? The razing of two major urban centers, five, a dozen? Two hundred thousand dead Iraqis, half a million, one million? We would seriously like to know.

The majority of the American press does not bother to go through the ritual of expressing reservations about the political costs of the Fallujah attack. They smell blood and seem to like the scent.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*, published in an area where antiwar sentiment is widespread, makes no bones about its bloodlust: “The success of the present operation will be gauged in part by how well U. S. commanders hold down their own casualties and those of Iraqi counterparts—and of Iraqi civilians sheltering in Fallujah—while crushing any insurgents who stay to fight. ... The anti-guerrilla crackdown that is supposed to accompany the emergency decree needs to be more successful than what the U.S. military and interim Iraqi leaders have been able to accomplish thus far.”

USA Today is forthright, declaring in an editorial, “The battle must be fought. The training of Iraqi forces delayed it. But as the U.S. and others have learned the hard way, guerrilla wars are about more than taking territory. Capturing Fallujah will open a new period that could determine whether the insurgents will be protected by the populace, or rejected in favor of peace.”

The Good Samaritans at the *Christian Science Monitor*, spiritual heirs to Mary Baker Eddy, whose *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* was “the culmination of her own life-long search for a spiritual system of healing,” bare their fangs in a particularly vile manner:

“The battle for Fallujah will go down in history as a textbook example of urban warfare. The US military used the most advanced technology and the best street-fighting tactics to hunt down the entrenched insurgents while keeping civilian casualties to a minimum.

“But the message of Fallujah isn’t the prowess of the United States but its tenacity.

“Having failed last April to retake that small Sunni city, the US could not again afford to appear weak to the would-be voters of Iraq. With elections planned for late January, Iraqis had to be shown that the US military, along with the fledgling Iraqi Army, will keep eliminating safe

sanctuaries for hostage-taking terrorists and bombmaking insurgents.”

The argument that the retaking of Fallujah represents a vital step in the “democratization” of Iraq is a common theme in the American press.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorializes: “Despite its fearsome costs—through Friday, some 18 U.S. troops and five Iraqi soldiers were killed, along with 600 insurgent fighters—there is little doubt that Fallujah had to be retaken. The city is the headquarters for Iraq’s Sunni Muslim minority, and without Sunni participation January’s elections could be considered illegitimate.”

The *Toledo [Ohio] Blade*: “Fallujah had to be taken away from the resistance if the scheduled January elections are to have any credibility. An important population center like Fallujah simply cannot be allowed to remain outside the control of the interim government and U.S. forces.”

The *Modesto [California] Bee*: “As the elections of a national assembly near, U.S. and Iraqi forces confront a rebel movement that is determined to disrupt the voting and, more broadly, to make Iraq ungovernable. Thus Washington has only one realistic option: Beat back the rebel offensive wherever it surfaces, despite the risk of increasing alienation among Iraqi Sunnis.”

The *Oregonian [Portland, Oregon]*: “Fallujah is the center, or at least a center, of the armed opposition to Iraq’s efforts to establish a democratic regime. That probably means this week’s attack is a necessary condition for any kind of election to go forward. The new government, even with the help of the United Nations, cannot conduct free, fair elections if rebels can control whole cities and launch murderous, intimidating attacks from them.”

None of these newspapers’ editors question the logic of a nationwide election and an entire “democratic” process supposedly made possible by the extermination of a city and the massacre of the national popular resistance forces.

Certain editors go out of their way to pay tribute to the American military.

Comments the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, “In the annals of war, there has never been a fighting force as capable as the Americans of waging urban warfare with weaponry and tactics more attuned to the need to avoid innocent loss of life. Fallujah was a citywide safe house for all manner of bad guys, beheaders and insurgents. It was an open taunt that prevented political progress and future amity among the ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. It had to be shut down.”

The editors of the *Des Moines Register* echo this sentiment, “America’s magnificently trained and equipped fighting forces are again on display in the long-awaited offensive to retake Fallujah from the Iraqi insurgents. There’s little doubt the troops can prevail militarily. Let us also pray that their bravery and sacrifice will be rewarded in the larger sense of bringing enough stability to Iraq to hold elections.”

No doubt similar tributes were paid to the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe* in the German press of 1939-40. In reality, the “battle for Fallujah” was entirely one-sided. US military and technical superiority over the Iraqi resistance is as great, if not greater, than the American army’s advantage over their Indian opponents in the 1870s and 1880s.

The openly right-wing press can hardly conceal its glee over “payback” in Fallujah. The *Indianapolis Star* proclaimed in an editorial, “The U.S.-led military offensive under way in Fallujah against Iraqi insurgents was long overdue. ‘We are determined to clean Fallujah from terrorists,’ interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi said on Monday. A hotbed of insurgent activity for months, Fallujah and other cities surrounding Baghdad must be cleared of resistance so the country can proceed with elections in January.”

The headline of the *Charleston [South Carolina] Post and Courier* editorial is quite explicit: “No option but force for Fallujah.” The comment lays the blame for the annihilation of the city squarely on the shoulders of those who sought to defend it from the American occupiers.

“The fanaticism of the al-Qaida-led terrorists and the obduracy of hard-line Sunni insurgents left no other alternative to the all-out offensive launched yesterday by a 15,000-strong force of U.S. Marines and Army troops, backed by units of the newly formed Iraqi Army. ... Now it is up to the U.S. Marines and Army, who are spearheading the thrust into Fallujah, to rid the city of its nest of vipers.”

The [Phoenix] *Arizona Republic* editorial carries the headline, “Fallujah must fall.” It argues that “with perhaps thousands more rebels massed in the city west of Baghdad, the Marines and Army must charge forward once again. It is a hellish business, fighting street by narrow street, and our prayers go with the young soldiers, as well as their Iraqi army allies. ... With a Fallujah teeming with terrorists, insurgents and fundamentalist anarchists, the planned national elections are jeopardized. ... That means Fallujah must be freed of terrorist control.”

The *Boston Herald* proclaims that the “Fight for Fallujah is a fight for us all.” The tabloid’s editors write: “The fight for Fallujah remained unfinished business for far too long. It was a nest of terrorist vipers last spring, when the charred and dismembered bodies of two American contractors were hung from one of the bridges over the Euphrates. And it was allowed to continue to grow and to fester—until now.”

So much for the American “free press,” free only of any commitment to democratic principles, honesty and truth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact