

The siege of Fallujah

America on a killing spree

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The televised broadcast of videotape showing a US marine executing a wounded, unarmed Iraqi at point-blank range inside a Fallujah mosque has provoked outrage throughout the Middle East, while creating a fresh crisis for the American military.

The marine has been suspended from his command, as the Pentagon initiates an official investigation into whether the killing constituted a war crime.

“We follow the law of armed conflict and hold ourselves to a high standard of accountability,” said Lt. Gen. John Sattler, commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

Please, general, spare us. This killing was noteworthy only because it happened to be captured on camera by an “embedded” reporter. Similar actions have taken place throughout the siege of Fallujah, where the rules of engagement essentially amounted to “kill anything that moves.”

Once again—as in the crisis over the torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib—the Pentagon will go through the motions of turning a young enlisted man into a scapegoat. The exposure of this one shooting will be used to obscure the reality that the entire operation in Fallujah constitutes a massive war crime carried out on the orders of the White House, with the active or tacit support of every segment of the American ruling establishment.

The razing of Fallujah has exposed the ugly face of US militarism to the world, while posing disturbing questions about the nature of American society itself.

The operation combined the Bush administration’s lust for vengeance over the killing of four US mercenaries in the city last April with a cold-blooded exercise in exemplary punishment aimed at intimidating all those who oppose the continued US occupation of Iraq.

Fallujah now lies in ruins. While the US military claims to have killed up to 2,000 “insurgents,” the number and identity of the dead are not so easily discerned. US forces have responded to small arms fire from houses and other structures by calling in artillery barrages, air strikes with 2,000-pound bombs and air-to-surface missiles together with volleys of tank fire. Homes, apartment buildings and nearly half of the city’s 120 mosques have been destroyed or severely damaged in this fashion.

Eyewitnesses report human corpses littering the city’s streets, gnawed at by starving dogs. Parents have been forced to watch their wounded children die and then bury their bodies in their gardens. According to one credible account, US troops machine-gunned an entire family of five to death when they tried to escape the fighting by swimming across the Euphrates River.

Civilians remaining in Fallujah were ordered to stay in their homes under a round-the-clock curfew or risk near-certain death at the hands of US troops. What was the fate of those who stayed inside? With the media reporting at least one out of every ten buildings flattened by the US bombardment, there is no way of knowing how many bodies lie beneath the rubble. It is also reported that US troops were equipped with thermal sights capable of detecting body heat inside houses. Any such detection

was assumed to indicate the presence of “insurgents,” prompting a lethal barrage.

Those wounded by US bombs, rockets and shells have been left to die. The first targets of the siege were the city’s medical facilities. The city’s main hospital was seized by Special Forces troops, while a clinic in the city was bombed, killing dozens of medical staff and patients.

The city’s remaining population has gone over a week without electricity or water, and food has run out. In short, Fallujah faces a humanitarian catastrophe. There has been an effective blackout of any reporting on these conditions in the American mass media. The US military onslaught has turned an estimated 200,000 people into homeless refugees. The suffering of these people—the supposed beneficiaries of US “liberation”—evokes even less media interest.

What have the people of Fallujah and the rest of Iraq done to deserve such homicidal cruelty? What could conceivably justify the US military killing Iraqis for the “crime” of living in their own country?

The US troops sent into the city are indoctrinated with the lie that the invasion of Iraq is part of a “war on terrorism,” and, on a more visceral level, that the violence inflicted upon the country’s population can somehow be justified as revenge for the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington.

The result has been a bloodbath. According to one recent study appearing in the British medical magazine *The Lancet*, the US invasion has resulted in 100,000 additional violent deaths in the space of barely 20 months. This is the equivalent of a September 11 every week-and-a-half in a country with less than one-tenth the population of the US.

That the Iraqis had nothing whatsoever to do with September 11 has been officially confirmed by multiple US government reports and investigations.

Even putting aside the lies about Iraq, the “war on terrorism” is itself a fraud, invented by Washington as a pretext for carrying out long-planned military actions. The September 11 plot emerged not out of Baghdad, but from within the murky world of American intelligence and its sponsorship of Islamic fundamentalist movements in the war against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

While US troops are being told to kill Iraqis to avenge terrorism, state sponsors of those who carried out the 9/11 attacks are well ensconced in the regimes of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—Washington’s close allies in the “war on terrorism”—and, in all likelihood, in the Bush administration itself.

The supposedly omnipresent threat of terrorism has been used as a pretext by Washington to justify its use of military power to pursue US geo-strategic interests through the domination of key global oil reserves. This imperialist motivation is clearly recognized the world over.

However, there is a peculiar and malevolent element within the conduct of this US policy. It is the sense, communicated from Washington, that America is motivated by a generalized anger against the rest of the world, and is using its violence in Iraq to teach everyone a lesson. The US

doctrine of preventive war means what it says: we can do the same thing to any of you whenever we please.

US television news reports—once again dominated by retired military commanders and “embedded” reporters who speak as cheerleaders for the combat units they have joined—convey the sense that translating this anger into overwhelming violence is not only justified, but feels good too.

That the massacre of an innocent people more than 5,000 miles away can be promoted as a means of boosting public morale and fostering national unity is an indication of a society suffering from protracted and profound degeneration.

Historians investigating Hitler’s Germany have spent some 60 years trying to fathom what made it possible for such a regime to arise in what was the most technically and culturally advanced country on the European continent. For all but the most facile “bad Hitler” theorists, the question arose: what were the deep contradictions within German society that gave rise to the murderous fury that Nazism unleashed against Europe?

While the atrocities carried out by Hitler’s regime were on a different scale than those now being committed by the Bush administration, there are undeniable parallels. For the first time since the Wehrmacht swept through Europe, the world is witness to a major imperialist power launching an unprovoked war of aggression, placing an entire people under military occupation and carrying out acts of collective and exemplary punishment against civilian populations. Such heinous acts must be rooted in America’s own social contradictions.

That this war was foisted upon the American people based on lies is undeniable, as is the media’s abject complicity in this deception.

Given the political environment and the media’s role, the fact should not be lost in analyzing the election returns that some 56 million people—just under half of the voters—turned out on Election Day to vote against Bush—and, in their minds, against the Iraq war.

Kerry’s declarations committing himself to continuing the occupation and “winning” in Iraq notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of those who voted for him did so because they want an end to this war. This popular sentiment is extraordinary, given that it has never been genuinely embraced by a single major leader of the Democratic Party, nor by any major figure in the media.

Among the 59 million who voted for Bush, there remains considerable ambivalence about the war. There is also plenty of confusion. Polls show that a substantial majority of these voters continue to believe the administration’s lies about Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and ties to 9/11.

The relentless efforts—by both Republicans and Democrats—to portray a global “war on terror” as the paramount issue facing the American people have obviously had their effect. But there are also powerful social as well as ideological forces at work in the confused acceptance of American militarism, including among some of the most impoverished layers of the population.

First, there are the interests of the financial oligarchy that dominates US society. The fortunes of America’s multimillionaires and billionaires are inextricably bound up with Washington’s drive for global hegemony and the use of military force to sustain US dominance of the world economy. The interests of those at the top of the social ladder are the foundation for the predominant political, philosophical and religious views that are communicated to the population by myriad means of mass media and mass culture.

Then there is the objective role played by militarism itself within US society. It was outgoing President—and former top US general—Dwight Eisenhower who warned against “the acquisition of unwarranted influence ... by the military-industrial complex.” In the 43 years since, this complex has grown far beyond Eisenhower’s worst fears, with a US military budget approaching half a trillion dollars—higher than those of the next 20 largest military powers combined.

In addition to over 2.5 million active-duty troops and reservists, there are hundreds of thousands more whose jobs are directly dependent upon the arms industry, which not only supplies the seemingly insatiable needs of the Pentagon, but also constitutes one of the most profitable export sectors of the US economy.

Add to that those who are employed in what is now referred to as “homeland security,” a term that broadly encompasses all federal, state and local police as well as the army of prison guards that oversees the million-and-a-half incarcerated Americans, and one has a sizeable constituency whose societal roles predispose them to embracing the “war on terrorism,” lies and all.

But there is another element involved that is less visible and far more contradictory. One of the principal functions of capitalist militarism is to divert social tensions, to direct popular anger over conditions of life outward against real or manufactured foreign enemies.

The explosive, angry character of American militarism’s eruption on the world arena is, to a large degree, a manifestation of the depth of these tensions and the lack of any political means for expressing, much less ameliorating them.

American society is the product of the most unrestrained development of the free market in the world. It is the most developed form of capitalist civilization—or anti-civilization. A Darwinian struggle for survival dominates all aspects of life, while the polarization between a wealthy elite and the masses of working people is greater than in any other advanced capitalist country.

Workers are treated as throwaway commodities, subject to unending rounds of “downsizing” and layoffs, while those at the top of the corporate ladder reap multimillion-dollar compensation packages. Every aspect of society, and everyone in it, is subordinated to the drive for profit.

A political system dominated by two capitalist parties that are fundamentally united in defending the interests of the corporations and the financial elite offers no alternative and no means of expressing social grievances. Institutions that in an earlier period played such a role—the trade unions, civil rights organizations, etc.—have been either reduced to empty shells or directly incorporated into maintaining the existing social order.

The government and the media worked throughout the post-World War II period to make anticommunism the state ideology. They continue to exercise a de facto ban on socialist views, insisting that there is no alternative to a society based upon the accumulation of wealth by a tiny elite at the expense of the broad majority of working people.

Under these conditions, large numbers of distressed and disoriented people are susceptible to the campaign to whip up nationalist hatreds for external enemies that are presented as the source of America’s problems. This campaign serves to blind people, both to the terrible crimes being carried out in their names abroad, and to the way in which the ruling elite manipulates nationalism to facilitate its own predatory financial interests at home.

Yet the same profound social contradictions that find toxic expression in the popular appeal of militarism can and are giving rise to a wholly opposed political perspective, one of opposition to the existing social order of inequality, exploitation and massive violence.

This opposition finds no outlet in the existing political setup in America. It can advance only by intersecting with a socialist and internationalist program for society’s transformation on a world scale.

The conditions are rapidly maturing for this perspective to find a path to the consciousness of masses of working people, providing them with a genuine means of realizing their own social interests, while putting an end to US militarism once and for all.



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