

The American media and the Iraq election

Joseph Kay, Barry Grey**2 February 2005**

There are times when one must give the devil his due. The American media is capable of carrying out extraordinary feats, turning lead into gold and an election held under foreign occupation into a victory for democracy.

With near total unanimity, all the resources of this giant propaganda machine—the reporters and columnists, television pundits and talk-radio hosts, professional image-makers and spin masters—have been mobilized over the past three days to sing the praises of the Iraqi election.

The election, we are told, is a vindication of the Bush administration and the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It is a defeat for the insurgents within Iraq and a rebuke to those within the US and around the world who oppose the war.

A central purpose of the mind-numbing media barrage is to overwhelm, confuse and intimidate public opinion, especially in the US. Even though, according to opinion polls, a majority of Americans oppose the war, those who are repelled by the destruction inflicted on Iraq and appalled by the lawless doctrine of preventive war are made to feel isolated and out of touch with reality. That, at any rate, is the aim of the media extravaganza.

At the very least, one is obliged to acknowledge that something good can come of an aggressive war, even one based on lies, and only those who harbor sympathy for the “terrorist” enemies of democracy can think otherwise. So we are told—by the “liberal” no less than the right-wing press.

A typical example is the editorial in the *New York Times* published the day after the election. Entitled “Message from Iraq,” the editorial states, “In an impressive range of mainly Shiite and Kurdish cities, a silenced majority of ordinary Iraqis defied threats of deadly mayhem to cast votes for a new, and hopefully democratic, political order.”

Times declares, one, could the question the legitimacy of the elections: “All who claim to be fighting in the name of the Iraqi people should now recognize that—in an open expression of popular will—Iraqis have expressed their clear preference that these battles be fought exclusively in the peaceful, constitutional arena.... Along with other Americans, whether supporters or critics of the war, we rejoice in a heartening advance by the Iraqi people.”

A measure of the *Times*’s fidelity to democratic principles is provided by an article in the same issue authored by John Burns (“For a Battered Populace, a Day of Civic Passion”). In the first paragraph, Burns harks back to “Iraq’s last partly free elections more than 50 years ago, before the assassination of King Faisal II began a spiraling descent into tyranny.”

According to Burns, the “descent into tyranny” began with the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy—the vassal of British imperialism, despised by the vast majority of the Iraqi people. Here the newspaper provides a hint of the type of “democratic” regime it hopes will emerge from the smoke and ruins of the American occupation.

The dishonesty of the *Times* is underscored by the flagrant contradiction between its post-election position and what it wrote just three weeks ago. On January 12, the newspaper published an editorial calling for a postponement of the election because it feared the vote would be largely boycotted by the Sunni population. This would, the *Times* argued, undermine the election’s legitimacy and possibly provoke “a civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims,” an outcome that “everyone agreed had to be avoided at all costs.”

“The coming elections—long touted as the beginning of a new, democratic Iraq—are looking more and more like the beginning of that worst-case scenario,” the newspaper wrote.

The *Times*’s “worst-case” scenario of January 12 is

essentially what transpired on January 30. The turnout in the largely Sunni areas of central Iraq was negligible. That, however, did not prevent the *Times* from hailing it on January 31 as a “heartening advance by the Iraqi people.”

What accounts for this about-face (which the *Times* does not bother either to acknowledge or explain)? There is really no mystery here. The election has happened, and the requirements of American imperialism in Iraq call for a corresponding adjustment in the line of the “newspaper of record.” All doubts have to be pushed aside for the greater good of sanctioning the election travesty and stupefying the American people.

This example of boundless hypocrisy serves to illustrate, once again, that the *Times* and the forces for which it speaks in the Democratic Party and liberal establishment fully support the war in Iraq. Whatever their differences with the Bush administration, they are of a tactical character. When it comes to crushing the Iraqi resistance and consolidating American control over Iraq and its oil wealth, there is virtual unanimity within and between the two parties, and within the ruling elite whose interests they jointly defend.

The *Washington Post* argued in its lead editorial that the vote in Iraq constituted “an answer to the question of whether the mission in Iraq remains a just cause.” The *Los Angeles Times* declared that “the world could honestly see American troops making it possible for a long-oppressed people to choose their destiny.” And so on.

The consensus on Iraq is part of a broader agreement on the pursuit of American hegemony throughout the world, and the use of military force to achieve it.

The media conveniently ignores certain basic truths: above all, the irreconcilable contradiction between democracy and an election held under the gun of an occupying power. It has no difficulty debasing the grand term “democracy” by associating it with the leveling of cities, the killing of tens of thousands of civilians, the use of torture, and the imposition of martial law.

It ignores the fact that the only candidates allowed to run in the election were those who have either collaborated with the occupation, or accommodated themselves to it, even though the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people oppose the presence of

American troops in their country. Nothing is said about the fact that most of the contending parties portrayed the election as a necessary step in ridding the country of the American invaders.

When it suits the purposes of US foreign policy, the American media is capable of voicing indignation over the violation of democratic principles. For example, Russia held a referendum at gunpoint in Chechnya in the spring of 2003, organized to rubber-stamp a constitution written by Moscow. The Russian military maintained its massive military presence throughout the process. The *New York Times* published an editorial in anticipation of the vote on January 14, 2003, entitled “A Sham Referendum.”

“The idea that a fair test of Chechen opinion can be carried out in the present climate of intimidation is ludicrous,” the newspaper declared. “Any government emerging from this flawed process is likely to be seen by Chechens as a band of Russian collaborators, not their own independently chosen representatives.... [Russian President Vladimir] Putin’s aim seems not to offer a real political opening, but a stage-managed show aimed at convincing the outside world that the Chechen war is over and no longer warrants international concern.”

How true such words ring, with the appropriate name changes, to describe the grotesque farce in Iraq!



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