Washington's criminal war against Iraq enters its third year

The Editorial Board
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Today begins year three of the US intervention in Iraq, with its tragic consequences for both the Iraqi and American people continuing to multiply.

The Iraqi dead—incinerated by US air strikes, shot to death at roadblocks, or killed in merciless sieges like the one mounted last November against Fallujah—number in the many tens of thousands.

US casualties have risen to over 1,520 dead, with more than 11,200 troops wounded and as many as 100,000 in need of mental health care as a result of the carnage they have witnessed in Iraq.

An American occupation army of 150,000 has proven incapable of extinguishing the Iraqi resistance or even securing the center of Baghdad. There is no indication that the killing is about to decline, much less cease, and US political and military officials speak in terms of an occupation stretching on for a decade, if not longer. Conditions for the Iraqi people remain catastrophic, with millions unemployed, basic services like electricity, water and sanitation still in a shambles and the threat of violence ever-present.

Yet, there is a growing drumbeat in the US media and within the ostensible opposition party, the Democrats, to exonerate the Bush administration for launching an unprovoked war based upon lies and credit American militarism with advancing democracy, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Middle East.

Coming on top of the Bush administration's lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda terrorists, the claim that the US conquest of Iraq is an exercise in democratization that has provided inspiration for people throughout the region is the most grotesque deception of all.

The US intervention in Iraq is an example not of democracy but criminality. It was made possible through a historic breakdown of democratic processes within the United States itself, which is rooted in the unprecedented social polarization between the masses of working people and a financial oligarchy that controls both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Installed through the suppression of the popular vote, the Bush administration came into office with already elaborated plans for a war to colonize Iraq. It seized upon the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as the pretext for executing these plans. Its attempts to terrorize the American people into accepting the war were facilitated by the Democratic Party and the mass media, which failed to mount any serious challenge to the administration's blatant lies.

The acquiescence of the media and the Democrats was the clearest proof that so-called preemptive war and the use of US military might to seize oil resources and assert global hegemony was the consensus policy of the American ruling elite.

March 19, 2003 is truly a day that will live in infamy. The largest imperialist power on the face of the globe, brazenly defying international law, launched its full military force against a defenseless nation that posed no threat whatsoever to the US.

The criminal character of this invasion has spread like a cancer into every facet of the US operation in Iraq. It has reproduced on a massive scale all of the crimes associated with colonial wars and occupations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and other oppressed regions of the globe.

Today, the American military oversees a network of concentration camps that holds at least 10,000 Iraqis, virtually none of whom have been formally charged with any offense. While the outrage and shame provoked by last year's photographs of torture and abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison have long been relegated to a footnote by the mass media, revelations continue to surface pointing to even worse crimes.

The Pentagon itself now admits to the deaths of 108 of those it has imprisoned in Iraq and Afghanistan, the majority involving violence. At least a quarter of the deaths are being investigated as homicides. Some of these cases have involved detainees being tortured or beaten to death over prolonged periods. If this much has become public, it is safe to assume that crimes of a far larger scale are still concealed behind the wall of military secrecy.

The Iraqi people have suffered war crimes involving the deliberate targeting of civilians and collective punishment at the hands of the US military. The word Fallujah will go down in history alongside the Warsaw Ghetto, Guernica, Lidice and My Lai as a synonym for atrocity.

The city's approximately 300,000 residents were driven from their homes by the US siege. A report issued by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) earlier this year reported that, while some 85,000 of them had returned, passing through US military checkpoints, as few as 3,000 had stayed in the city overnight. The overwhelming majority found their homes reduced to rubble and a city where electricity, water and health care have all been cut off. According to a summary of the UNHCR report on Fallujah, "40 percent of the buildings were completely destroyed, 20 percent had major damage and 40 percent had significant damage."

Witnesses report that bodies are still being dug out of the rubble. Survivors remain traumatized by the wholesale killing that took place in the city, some recounting the massacre of unarmed family members in house-to-house raids by US Marines.

Dahr Jamail, writing for the Inter Press Service, cited the testimony of one 16-year-old girl:

"She stayed for three days with the bodies of her family who were killed in their home. When the soldiers entered she was in her home with her father, mother, 12 year-old brother and two sisters.

"She watched the soldiers enter and shoot her mother and father directly, without saying anything. They beat her two sisters, then shot them in the head. After this her brother was enraged and ran at the soldiers while shouting at them, so they shot him dead."

The slaughter continues. Not only US troops, but also an army of mercenaries—not a few of them veterans of fascist death squads in countries like South Africa and Chile—have a license to kill any Iraqi man, woman or child seen as a potential threat. The pervasiveness of this kind

of violence was indicated this week when a top general in the US-organized Iraqi military was shot dead at a roadblock for violating a curfew.

Massive corruption

Alongside the killing, Iraq has been the scene of wholesale corruption and outright theft by politically connected military contractors. A criminal war has unleashed a host of thieves upon Iraq.

A recent report by Pentagon auditors cited the Halliburton Company, formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, for overcharging the US government $108 million for fuel imports to Iraq. This included one case in which the company charged $27 million to transport liquefied petroleum gas that it had bought in Kuwait for only $82,000. The audit was completed in October, but kept secret by the administration until after the November election.

An employee of the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR) was indicted this week in a bid-rigging scam that overpaid a Kuwaiti contractor nearly $5 million for fuel tankers. The KBR employee is charged with taking a $1 million kickback for cementing the deal.

A recent report by Transparency International, a watchdog group headed by former World Bank officials, warned that "Iraq will become the biggest corruption scandal in history."

The claim that such hellish conditions of blood and filth serve as an example to be emulated by people in other parts of the Arab world is at once preposterous and obscene.

The assertions that the January 30 election in Iraq was a vindication of the Bush administration's policy and an inspiration for the region are no more credible. First, it should be recalled, the vote was forced upon Washington, which had installed a puppet Iraqi Governing Council as a front for the American occupation authority. Faced with massive Shiite demonstrations last summer, US officials agreed to a vote only reluctantly in order to prevent armed resistance from spreading.

The biggest victors were political parties connected to Shiite clerics, whose goal is to impose Islamic law, and Kurdish leaders bent on establishing control over a semi-autonomous ethnic enclave in the north that would include the multiethnic city of Kirkuk and its oilfields. This is scarcely the formula for a democratic solution to the complex historical problems confronting Iraq.

The parliament that emerged from this vote has been as yet unable to form a government and exercises no power. The real relation of forces was evident in its opening session, held in the heavily fortified and American-controlled Green Zone, with US helicopter gunships flying overhead.

The propagation of the myth that the Iraqi election represented a triumph for democracy which is paving the way to a democratic transformation of the Middle East serves as a warning that the Iraqi war is only the prelude to further acts of US military aggression.

It is bound up with the Bush administration's recent proclamations that it is engaged in a global struggle for democracy and against "tyranny." The "tyrants" targeted by Washington, virtually without exception, govern countries that either control substantial energy resources—Iran and Venezuela—or occupy strategic positions in energy-producing regions or along the routes used to ship oil and gas to America's economic rivals. The dictatorial regimes of the Persian Gulf that act as US client states, providing oil and military bases, are, of course, excluded from this list.

There is ample evidence that the majority of the American people is opposed to the war in Iraq and would prove even more hostile to a widening of the predatory US intervention in the Middle East in the name of combating "tyranny."

The most recent poll conducted by the *Washington Post* and ABC News showed 53 percent saying the war was not worth fighting, and 70 percent believing the 1,500 US military deaths were an unacceptable price. A large plurality of those polled said the US position and standing in the world had been damaged by the war.

What is most significant is that this mass hostility to the war finds virtually no expression either in the corporate-controlled media or within the leadership of the Democratic Party. The opposition has developed without leadership and in the teeth of never-ending patriotic propaganda.

Just Wednesday, the House of Representatives approved $81.4 billion in "emergency" funding to continue the war. The measure passed by a landslide vote of 388 to 43, with the vast majority of Democrats supporting the administration. Bush hailed the action as a show of "strong bipartisan support" for "our strategy to win the war on terror."

The US is currently spending close to $5 billion a month on the Iraq war. At the same time, the government is preparing massive cuts in Medicaid and other basic social benefits, while the Senate voted on Thursday to approve another $134 billion in tax cuts for the wealthy.

Far from spreading democracy abroad, the war in Iraq is accelerating the destruction of democratic rights within the United States itself. The Bush administration has erected, in the form of the Homeland Security Department, the Patriot Act, military tribunals, the seizure and indefinite incarceration of "enemy combatants," a vast expansion of internal spying and surveillance, pervasive government secrecy and other measures constituting the infrastructure of a police state.

The war serves to further widen the social chasm separating the masses of working people from the financial elite. Pursuing its own interests by means of war, this elite is imposing the full burden of militarism on the backs of American workers, through the destruction of living standards and the sending of working class youth to kill and be killed.

The broad sentiment for ending the war and the growing anger over social inequality find no outlet within the US two-party system. The struggle against war can advance only along the path of establishing the political independence of the working class. It requires the building of a mass socialist movement for the revolutionary transformation of American society.

On the second anniversary of the war in Iraq, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* pledge to intensify and expand the effort to build an independent political movement of the working class in the US and internationally to end the scourges of militarism and war.

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