

Washington in crisis over opposition to Iraq war

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28 June 2005

President George W. Bush has been forced to renew his efforts at selling the war in Iraq to the American people under conditions in which Washington's military adventure has turned into a quagmire and popular support for a withdrawal of US troops has reached an all-time high.

Bush is set to deliver a rare prime-time television address Tuesday night, using massed troops at Fort Bragg in North Carolina as his backdrop. The setting is itself highly significant, casting the president once again as the war-time "commander-in-chief," accountable to no one because of his control over the US military.

The administration's recent attempts to portray anyone questioning its policy in Iraq as a traitor and accomplice in the death of American troops is a measure of its growing desperation in the face of a sea-change in public opinion.

Recent polls have shown fully 60 percent of the American people favoring US withdrawal from Iraq. They further indicate that more Americans blame Bush for the war (49 percent) than Saddam Hussein (44 percent). More than half of those polled say the war was "not worth fighting," and that it has contributed nothing to the security of the US, while fully three-quarters believe that the current casualty levels are unacceptable.

What is Bush's response? In a radio address from the White House Saturday he previewed the thrust of his upcoming televised speech—essentially a call to stay the course in Iraq and maintain a brutal and hated military occupation, in the name of "freedom" and the struggle to defeat "terrorism."

"Now we will see that cause to victory in Iraq," Bush declared. "A democratic Iraq will be a powerful setback to the terrorists who seek to harm our nation."

Bush made it clear he intends for US troops to be killing and dying in Iraq for years to come. He declared, "Our military strategy is clear: We will train Iraqi security forces so they can defend their freedom and protect their people, and then our troops will return home with the honor they have earned."

Even those most optimistic about the fledgling Iraqi security forces say that it will take five more years before they are in any position to fight on their own. Less sanguine observers question whether the goal will ever be reached, given the identification of these forces with a despised foreign occupation and their infiltration by the Iraqi resistance.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld gave his own estimate Sunday, stating in a television news interview that the "insurgency could go on for any number of years. Insurgencies tend to go on five, six, eight, ten, twelve years."

After more than two years of a war that has claimed tens of thousands of Iraqi lives together with those of nearly 1,750 US military personnel—and at a cost of nearly \$180 billion—the administration envisions another decade of carnage in Iraq and a permanent US military occupation.

Meanwhile, US military commanders have begun to distance themselves from the false optimism exhibited by the administration—summed up in

Vice President Dick Cheney's claim last month that Iraqi resistance to the US occupation was in its "last throes."

Testifying before Congress last Thursday, US Central Command chief Gen. John Abizaid said "there are more foreign fighters coming into Iraq than there were six months ago," while "the overall strength of the insurgency...was the same as it was six months ago." Pointing to deepening military morale problems, he added that soldiers were starting to "ask me the question whether or not they've got support from the American people." Asked about Cheney's remark, the general replied, "I'm sure you'll forgive me from criticizing the vice president."

The continuing setbacks suffered by the US military, the mounting casualties, and the growing popular opposition have emboldened the administration's nominal political opponents in the Democratic Party to criticize the conduct of the war—while swearing their allegiance to the same cause proclaimed by Bush. For the most part, the Democrats' reproach of the administration starts from the call for more troops and greater national unity behind the war effort.

The clearest enunciation of this reactionary policy came from Senator Joseph Biden, the chief Democratic foreign policy spokesman and an early contender for the party's 2008 presidential nomination. Speaking before the Brookings Institution last week, Biden declared, "I want to see the president of the United States succeed in Iraq...His success is America's success, and his failure is America's failure."

What America is Biden talking about? Success in a war launched on the basis of lies and for the predatory aim of asserting US hegemony over the strategic oil reserves of the Middle East will not benefit American working people. Rather, the aims of this war are bound up with the interests of a financial oligarchy that is pursuing an equally rapacious campaign to destroy the living standards of workers in the US itself.

The Democratic senator went on to urge a united effort to "regain the confidence of the American people." He called for a "new compact between the administration and Congress to secure the informed consent of the American people for the remainder of the job... so that they will give the president the time we need to succeed in Iraq."

What once passed for a liberal media has sounded a similar note. Thus, the *New York Times* began a June 25 editorial debunking the administration's linking of Iraq to the September 11, 2001 attacks and ended by insisting, "If things are going to be turned around, there has to be an honest discussion about what is happening."

It helpfully added: "Of all the justifications for invading Iraq that the administration juggled in the beginning, the only one that has held up over time is the desire to create a democratic nation that could help stabilize the Middle East. Any sensible discussion of what to do next has to begin by acknowledging that."

Having disposed of all of the patently false pretexts for the war, the *Times* promotes the ideological big lie pushed to the fore by the Bush administration itself in its second term, identifying the pursuit of US strategic interests by means of war and colonial-style occupation as a

global crusade for democracy. This, it suggests, is a “sensible” sales pitch for those trying once again to con the American people.

Similar views prevail as well among the more left-wing spokesmen of the Democratic Party. Former Clinton aide Sidney Blumenthal, writing in the *Guardian*, lamented, “Bush’s light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel vision can only accelerate the cycle of disillusionment. His instinctive triumphalism inevitably has a counter-productive effect.” Popular disillusionment with the war, so evident in the opinion polls, is seen as a cause for concern, rather than encouragement.

And *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert Monday published his second column beginning with the unequal burden borne by working class youth in the war and concluding with the clear suggestion that reinstating the draft is in order.

The precipitous decline in public support for the war is the product of the unrelenting carnage in Iraq, together with the realization by broad layers of the population that they have been systematically lied to by the administration, the Democratic Party and the media, all of which are profoundly discredited.

The suggestion by leading figures within the administration that the growing rejection of the war is the fault of a biased press is ridiculous. The American mass media is no less culpable than the Bush administration itself for dragging the American people into a war based on lies. It has systematically censored from its reports any indication of the depth of antiwar sentiment and has excluded from its stable of pundits virtually anyone expressing the widely held desire for an end to the occupation of Iraq.

The near universal dismissal by the American media of the significance of the so-called Downing Street memo—the British document confirming that the Bush administration “fixed” US intelligence to provide a false justification for an unprovoked war—is one more example of the media’s complicity in this aggression.

The media and the Democrats are united with the Bush administration in their determination to exclude the “W” word from public debate. Withdrawal of US troops, the public is told again and again, is not an option. It would unleash bloodshed, sectarian violence and regional instability—the very things that the invasion and occupation themselves have produced.

But the shared concern of Democrats and Republicans—their public recriminations notwithstanding—goes beyond the immediate political and military conjuncture in Iraq. What is involved is the shattering of the US government’s credibility, which has far-reaching implications for both foreign and domestic policy.

Beyond the fate of Iraq itself are the implications for the fundamental strategy embraced by both big business parties: the utilization of US military power to offset the decline in the global economic position of American capitalism by seizing control of markets and resources. Iraq is by no means the last war on Washington’s agenda. Victory there is seen within the political establishment as laying the foundations for the next war of aggression.

Bush himself has repeatedly talked about fighting “the new wars of the 21st century.” Vice President Cheney, addressing the graduating class of the US Air Force Academy at the beginning of this month, said that many of the cadets had wished “that you could graduate on September 12 and take your place in the first war of the 21st century.” He assured them, however, “... you will play an historic role in the great victories to come.”

Where are these next “great victories” to be realized? Iran is clearly in Washington’s crosshairs. The *Financial Times* noted Monday that Cheney, Rumsfeld and others within the Bush administration welcomed the electoral victory of the so-called Islamic hard-liner in the country’s presidential election. They clearly hope it will pave the way for confrontation and war.

Military aggression is equally possible against any number of other

countries, including oil-rich states such as Venezuela and Nigeria, as well as named enemies like Syria, North Korea and Cuba.

The decline in public tolerance for such military adventures has dire implications for the ruling establishment. Under conditions of unprecedented social polarization within the US, war and the threat of war have become the essential glue for holding society together and legitimizing a government that defends the interests of a tiny financial oligarchy against those of the vast majority of working people.

Moreover, a repudiation of the war by the American people represents an indictment of the entire political setup in the US. There is no faction within the ruling elite that can credibly point to the record and claim, “We opposed this war.” The Congress, both big business parties, the media and the corporations are all implicated.

The growth of popular opposition to the war has come entirely from below. It finds no serious reflection in the political deliberations of the US government or in the narrow and reactionary range of opinion that is permitted by the mass media. It therefore has profoundly revolutionary implications and has provoked deep concern within the all sections of the ruling establishment.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. We categorically reject the arguments of those so-called liberals who claim to oppose the war, but insist that such a withdrawal is unthinkable. The worst possible outcome of the war in Iraq would be a US “success.” If Washington is able to claim a victory, it will inevitably use it as the springboard to new and greater acts of military aggression that ultimately will place in question the survival of humanity.

Along with an immediate withdrawal, the SEP insists that all of those responsible for plotting and launching this illegal war be held accountable, both politically and judicially. They should be brought before an independent tribunal and tried for war crimes.

The united front of Democrats and Republicans behind the war—and against the majority of Americans who oppose it—underscores the unbridgeable chasm that separates the entire political establishment from the working people. It raises directly and urgently the task of making a political break with the Democrats and the two-party system, and establishing an independent party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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