

Where Frank Rich goes wrong: the war in Iraq and the stakes for American imperialism

Patrick Martin
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Frank Rich of the *New York Times* is one of a handful of columnists for the major daily newspapers in the United States who exhibit intelligence and compassion. He makes no secret of his loathing for the war in Iraq—a sentiment entirely to his credit and rare in the media. And he recognizes that the Bush administration, with its combination of criminality and recklessness, represents something qualitatively new and troubling in American political life.

That being said, the limitations of Rich's liberalism were all too clearly on display in the column published on Sunday under the headline, "Someone Tell the President the War Is Over."

Rich compares Bush to the proverbial Japanese soldier marooned on a Pacific atoll and still fighting World War II, writing: "President Bush may be the last person in the country to learn that for Americans, if not Iraqis, the war in Iraq is over." Citing the growing public opposition to the war in Iraq and the danger of huge losses for the Republican Party in the 2006 mid-term elections, Rich declares, "Such political imperatives are rapidly bringing about the war's end."

The *Times* columnist is clearly encouraged by the media attention given to the antiwar activities of Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a young soldier killed in Baghdad who is camped outside Bush's Texas ranch, demanding a meeting with the president. He also cites the near-victory of an antiwar Iraq war veteran, running as the Democratic candidate in a special election for a normally safe Republican congressional seat in Ohio, and statements by nervous Republican politicians, concerned that the White House has failed to recognize the growth of public disillusionment with the war as the US death toll approaches 2,000.

Rich is not wrong to believe that, in terms of public opinion, the summer of 2005 has marked a decisive shift against the war. He makes a striking comparison, noting that Bush's approval rating on the war, now down to 34 percent, nearly matches the low of 32 percent for Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war in Vietnam in March 1968, just before Johnson announced he would not seek re-election. Bush's overall approval rating at 42 percent is just barely higher than Johnson's 41 percent in his final year in office.

But it is self-delusion to believe that the collapse of public support for the Bush administration, as measured by opinion

polls or even elections, will be sufficient, in and of itself, to bring an end to the war. Rich writes: "The country has already made the decision for Mr. Bush. We're outta there."

One small difficulty stands in the way: it is Bush, not "the country," who exercises the powers of commander-in-chief. Congress, not the American people, authorizes the tens of billions to finance the war. Neither the Bush administration nor the congressional Republican leadership has shown the slightest intention of getting out of Iraq.

As for the Democratic Party, the nominal "opposition," it is a remarkable fact—one whose significance Rich ignores—that as the American people have turned against the war, leading Democrats have come forward to attack the Bush administration from the right, calling the existing troop levels inadequate and urging a significant expansion of the Army and Marines, the two forces tied down by the bloody guerrilla warfare in Iraq.

In other words, the established political structures in the United States, far from being responsive to public opinion, are increasingly committed to carrying out deeply unpopular and anti-democratic policies.

The millions of American working people and youth who oppose the war in Iraq must face the facts: the war cannot be stopped through protest and pressure on the existing political parties and institutions. What is required is the development of a mass movement from below—an independent political mobilization of working people which opposes both the war in Iraq and the capitalist system which is the fundamental cause of the war.

The fallacy of Rich's position is that his opposition to the war is based on moral outrage, rather than an analysis of the social and economic interests which are driving the conflict. He uncritically accepts the Bush administration's own description of the decision to invade Iraq as a "war of choice," as though there was no inner logic or historical necessity involved.

While there is certainly an element of arbitrariness and willfulness in the timing of the war and the pretexts used to justify it, it can hardly be argued that Bush's invasion of Iraq is purely subjective and irrational. The current conflict, after all, is the second major US war against the same country in 12 years, an interval during which Iraq was subjected to economic

blockade, the imposition of US-British “no-fly” zones, and repeated bombing attacks.

After one abstracts from all such contingencies as Bush’s ignorant and sadistic personality, the pro-war agitation of the neo-conservative faction of the Republican Party, and the desire of White House political strategists to divert attention from the domestic economic crisis, there remain more fundamental driving forces behind the invasion of Iraq: American imperialism seeks to control the world’s two largest sources of oil and gas, the Middle East and Central Asia, both to insure its own supplies and to give it the upper hand in the struggle against its major rivals in Europe and Asia.

Iraq sits on the second largest oil reserves in the world, and the conquest of Iraq puts American military forces in a key strategic position at the crossroads of the Middle East, guarding access to the Saudi and other Persian Gulf oil fields to the south, while able to strike out to the west against Syria, to the north to the Caspian Sea, and to the east against Iran.

Far from suggesting any pullback from Iraq, Bush gave an interview to Israeli state television Friday night in which he threatened to use force against Iran to destroy its nuclear energy program, which Washington claims is a cover for the building of nuclear weapons. He declared that the United States and Israel “are united in our objective to make sure that Iran does not have a weapon.” (Israel, of course, has hundreds of nuclear weapons targeted on the Arab states and Iran.)

Bush said that if ongoing talks between three European powers and Iran failed, “all options are on the table.” In language that was deliberately provocative and went beyond his previous hints of war, he added, “The use of force is the last option for any president. You know, we’ve used force in the recent past to secure our country.”

The obvious suggestion was that the invasion of Iraq is to be a precursor to an even bloodier and more catastrophic military intervention against Iran, a country three times larger in both area and population.

On Monday, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a report by its senior Washington correspondent Ron Brownstein citing military experts who said the Pentagon was building the infrastructure to make possible a permanent US military occupation of Iraq, with bases that could sustain as many 50,000 US troops, a force sufficient to launch a major attack on any of Iraq’s neighbors.

It is worth noting that, two days before Rich’s column, the *Washington Post* published an op-ed column by former Nixon secretary of state Henry Kissinger, for decades one of the most ruthless and cynical strategists for American imperialism. Kissinger wrote: “Because of the long reach of the Islamist challenge, the outcome in Iraq will have an even deeper significance than that in Vietnam. If a Taliban-type government or a fundamentalist radical state were to emerge in Baghdad or any part of Iraq, shock waves would ripple through the Islamic world. Radical forces in Islamic countries or Islamic minorities

in non-Islamic states would be emboldened in their attacks on existing governments. The safety and internal stability of all societies within reach of militant Islam would be imperiled. This is why many opponents of the decision to start the war agree with the proposition that a catastrophic outcome would have grave global consequences—a fundamental difference from the Vietnam debate.”

Kissinger’s last point is the most important: unlike Vietnam, where there were deep divisions within the ruling elite over whether that war was worth the cost, there is virtual unanimity today, among both leading Republicans and Democrats, that American imperialism cannot afford to lose in Iraq. There is no significant section of the Democratic leadership that supports withdrawal from Iraq. On the contrary, the most prominent spokesmen for the party on this issue, such as senators Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, and Joseph Biden, are calling for more troops and a more forceful effort to suppress the insurgency against the US occupation.

At the end of his column, Rich seems to be drawn towards a position of endorsing such an escalation, even though it conflicts with his past denunciations of the war. He writes that, “this administration long ago squandered the credibility needed to make the difficult case that more human and financial resources might prevent Iraq from continuing its descent into civil war and its devolution into jihad central.”

Rich, of course, acknowledges that both the danger of civil war and the influx of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists are consequences of the US invasion. But he nonetheless implies that a continuation and deepening of the US intervention might be justified to prevent what he calls an “even greater disaster” than what already exists.

All such arguments must be rejected. American imperialist military intervention *is* the disaster in Iraq. Every day that it continues only compounds the disaster for both the Iraqi people and the American soldiers who are being used as cannon fodder.

The only principled course is to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American troops and personnel, as well as the remaining troops of the US-led “coalition,” combined with the payment of extensive reparations to the Iraqi people. This must be combined with the prosecution for war crimes of all those responsible for planning and perpetrating the invasion and occupation.



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