WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

The consequences of the US-led war against Iraq

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In speaking on the political situation in Iraq, I propose to expand on the theme outlined by David North in his opening remarks: examining—and responding to—the prognosis that is advanced by the defenders of the existing economic and social order, and by the Bush administration in particular.

In March 2003, the official prognosis concerning Iraq—or, more accurately, the official propaganda—went broadly as follows:

The US-led invasion was a necessary and justified intervention to remove a brutal dictator whose regime threatened world peace and stability by its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction and its support for international terrorism.

Further, the trauma and cost of the US military occupation would be justified, because it would lay the basis for the emergence of the first genuine democracy in the Middle East, with unprecedented constitutional protection of democratic rights. Iraq, the defenders of the Bush administration claimed, would be a beacon of hope for the region. Regimes throughout the Middle East would be compelled to implement similar sweeping democratic reforms.

According to this schema, within several decades the Middle East would be transformed. The region would have shaken off Islamic fundamentalism and economic backwardness, and fully embraced the free market that prevails in the so-called western democracies. Iraq would be fully recovered from the war and US troops would have staged a full withdrawal—undoubtedly showered with flowers by the grateful Iraqi people.

I think that is a relatively accurate summary of the statements made at the time by the Bush administration, US thinktanks, the Blair government in Britain, the Howard government in Australia, and the pro-war media, in their efforts to defend the 2003 invasion.

It is now well established that the entire campaign of demonising the Hussein regime over WMDs and terrorism consisted of crude lies and distortions.

The official propaganda, however, did contain one element of the truth. The Iraq war was, indeed, part of a broader agenda by US imperialism and its allies to transform the political conditions that prevailed in the Middle East in the decades following World War II.

The real perspective is not the creation of flourishing democracies, but pliant client states that bow to US domination of their territory, labour and, above all, resources.

It is indisputable that one of the primary war aims of US imperialism was the predatory seizure of the world's second-largest oil reserves.

More broadly, the perspective of Cheney, Rumsfeld and the other principal authors of the illegal invasion of Iraq was that the overwhelming military supremacy of the US could be used to intimidate governments and peoples around the globe and subordinate them to the interests of the American ruling elite.

The view in Washington was that "shock and awe" tactics—a method termed "blitzkrieg" by the Nazi regime—would shatter all Iraqi resistance. The rapid military devastation of what the Pentagon knew was an effectively defenseless country would send a signal to all potential rivals, such as the European powers and China, of the consequences of challenging US hegemony.

Results of the US-led invasion

Looking back on the first months of the occupation, it is clear that the invading force, far from seeking to create the foundations for democracy, consciously sought to bring about the complete collapse of the Iraqi state and Iraqi civil society.

Developments that substantiate this assessment include:

1) The massacres that accompanied the entry of US troops in Baghdad. Based on the casualty figures reported at the time, more Iraqis died during the 64th Armoured Regiment's rampage into the Iraqi capital on April 5, 2003 than were killed during the brutal 10-day US assault on the city of Fallujah in November 2004.

2) The incitement by US forces of wholesale looting, arson, murder and general anarchy in Baghdad and other cities, which claimed hundreds of lives and caused incalculable damage to Iraq's cultural and historical heritage.

3) The decision to disband the Iraqi armed forces—the only really national institution in the country—which threw hundreds of thousands of people out of work.

4) The terror unleashed against the Iraqi people during 2003, including searches, night raids, mass detentions and the criminal torture at prisons such as Abu Ghraib, all of which were designed to humiliate and break the will of the population.

The consequences for the Iraqi masses of the US invasion have been truly horrifying. There were an estimated 100,000 extra deaths in the country between March 2003 and September 2004, according to a study published in the *Lancet* medical journal. Unknown thousands have been maimed. Unemployment has hovered between 35 to 50 percent, while every aspect of infrastructure required for civilised existence is dysfunctional—electricity generation, sewerage, health care and the

education system.

The war's architects planned that this devastation would produce a cowed and terrorised population, which would submit to long-term US rule.

In March 2003, the *World Socialist Web Site* made its own prognosis about the consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Firstly, we stressed that it was the outcome of the breakdown of the postwar stability of world capitalism and the increasing desperation of the American ruling elite in the face of mounting strategic and economic challenges from an array of rivals.

The statement published by the WSWS at the very beginning of the war, authored by David North and entitled "The crisis of American capitalism and the war against Iraq", highlighted the centrality of oil in world economy and the growing international tensions over access to supplies.

North drew attention to the constituency that existed within the United States for a program of predatory militarism—a corrupt social element whose wealth was based on the impoverishment of both the American working class and what he described as the "horrifying destitution of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the former USSR".

The statement made the following point:

"It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the extremely militaristic evolution of American foreign policy is, to a significant extent, an attempt by the ruling elite to deal with the dangers posed by the ever-increasing levels of social tension within the United States. Militarism serves two critical functions: first, conquest and plunder can provide, at least in the short term, additional resources that can ameliorate economic problems; second, war provides a means for directing internal social pressures outward."

North went on to conclude that, whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict, American imperialism had placed itself on a rendezvous with disaster. He emphasised that US capitalism "would not through the medium of war find a viable solution to its internal maladies".

The cultivation of sectarian divisions

As the third anniversary of the invasion approaches, the prognosis of the WSWS stands up extraordinarily well, while nothing in Iraq has unfolded according to the schemas of the Bush administration.

The brutality of the US military in the initial stages of the occupation created such hatred and opposition that a resistance movement quickly developed, and has been able to sustain itself ever since. This is particularly the case in the predominantly Sunni Arab areas of the country, which bore the brunt of the "shock and awe" tactics.

Within 12 months of the invasion, the US military had largely lost control over large swathes of the Sunni Triangle—the central and western provinces of Iraq. By April 2004, the occupation was also confronted with an uprising of the predominantly Shiite urban poor in Baghdad and a number of southern cities. The trigger for the Shiite rebellion was two-fold: the catastrophic social conditions facing the overwhelming majority and the attempted US crackdown on the religious and political movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The manner in which the US occupation sought to regain control had major political consequences that, to a considerable extent, have shaped the situation that exists today.

The interim government of Iyad Allawi, an émigré who had plotted with the US to invade Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War, did not have sufficient influence to bring the Shiite uprising to an end. US officials in Iraq therefore made a discernable shift. They began relying ever more openly on representatives of the Shiite clerical establishment, who were collaborating with the US invasion on the basis that it could help elevate them into positions of political power.

The leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani and the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) used their influence to restrain the bulk of the Shiite population from backing the Sadrist uprising. Sadr himself was convinced to agree to a ceasefire in September 2004, in exchange for the occupation forces allowing his movement to conduct open political activity over the following months.

With the Sadrist rebellion contained, the US military was able to focus on brutal operations against the Sunni insurgency. In November 2004, American marines laid waste to the city of Fallujah, committing blatant war crimes and slaughtering hundreds of people.

The savage assault deepened the alienation among the Sunni Arab population. Sunni clerics and political parties retaliated by calling for a boycott of the January 30, 2005 elections. Less than 10 percent of Sunnis voted for the so-called transitional government, which was tasked with drafting a new constitution.

The outcome was the formation of a regime controlled by parties explicitly based on the sectarian interests of the Shiite elite in the south of Iraq and the Kurdish elite in the north, with next to no Sunni representation.

The transitional government formed by the Shiite and Kurdish-based parties in May 2005 proceeded, with US backing, to marginalise the Sunni establishment that had dominated power and privilege since Iraq's creation as a nation-state.

The constitution was drafted in consultation with the US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad. It established the mechanisms for the de-facto partition of Iraq into three regions: a Kurdish north, exerting sway over the revenues of the northern oil fields; a Shiite-dominated south, controlling the revenues of the major southern oil fields; and a deprived Sunni central region, with little in the way of natural resources.

In this way, the conditions were consciously created, under the auspices of US imperialism, for sectarian divisions to dominate Iraqi politics and society. This state of affairs has intensified the incidence of violence across the country and created an array of new problems for the occupation forces.

In the Sunni areas, the guerilla war being conducted against the US military and the Iraqi government has escalated over the past year—with the number of attacks per day increasing from 77 in November 2004, to 90 in November 2005.

The fighting has the character of a civil war. Most of the Iraqi Army is Shiite, while the Interior Ministry intelligence agency and police commandos—a paramilitary force of over 10,000—are effectively controlled by SCIRI. One estimate is that 95 percent of the police in the Sadr City area of Baghdad—a working class and largely Shiite suburb with a population of some two million—are members or loyalists of the Sadrist movement of Moqtada al-Sadr.

Death squads, secret prisons and torture are being used by the Shiite fundamentalists to wipe out their Sunni rivals and intimidate the broader population into accepting their domination. Hundreds of Sunnis have been dragged from their homes and murdered in Baghdad and other cities.

In the Kurdish north, there are continual calls for formal separation from Iraq. The northern units of the Iraqi Army are, in reality, Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen, whose loyalties are with the Kurdish Regional Government and who are ardent supporters of a separate Kurdish state. Any move toward Kurdish independence would have tremendous implications, as it would call into question the borders of Turkey, Syria and Iran, all of which have a substantial Kurdish minority.

Thus, what exists in Iraq is not the subdued and pliant client state envisaged by the war's planners in 2003. Rather, Washington confronts an extremely volatile and unstable situation.

A political and military quagmire

The results of the December 15, 2005 election have only aggravated this state of affairs.

The Bush administration's preferred outcome was large votes for figures such as Allawi at the expense of the Shiite fundamentalists. It directed considerable resources into Allawi's campaign, promoting him as a secular strongman who could unite the country. Instead, the Shiite parties once again emerged as the major faction in the parliament, with Allawi winning only a small number of seats.

This is not what Washington wanted. It considers Sadr unreliable, while SCIRI's links with the Iranian regime have always been viewed with suspicion.

An article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 21 which referred to unnamed US officials making clear that the Bush administration was not prepared to accept the Shiite parties taking control of the Iraqi government.

The article began: "Disappointed by the election performance of Iraqi moderate parties, US officials have established a more modest goal as Iraqi leaders divide power in the new government."

The more "modest goal" was "preventing religious parties from gaining a stronghold on the army and police". US officials are now working to have SCIRI stripped of its control over the Interior Ministry. A US official told the *Los Angeles Times*, referring to the Shiite parties: "We want them to end up unhappy, but not so unhappy that they will go out and start breaking things up. That makes it a very tough thing to do".

This is taking place within the context of escalating tensions between the Bush administration and the Iranian regime, with which, as I have already noted, elements of the Shiite fundamentalists are closely linked.

The possibility cannot be excluded of an open clash between the Shiite groups and the US military. This could be provoked by either a US conflict with Iran or in response to US efforts to deprive the Shiite parties of control over the government.

There is already rising anger among the Shiite masses toward the US occupation, due to cutbacks in fuel subsidies dictated by the International Monetary Fund's economic restructuring program. Petrol prices have been raised by nearly 300 percent this month and food rations reduced.

While tensions increase in the Shiite areas, there is no letup in the fighting against the US military in the Sunni areas. A recent *Washington Post* article dealt, for example, with the situation in Baiji—the site of Iraq's largest northern oil refinery—and the experiences of a group of soldiers from a platoon of the 101st Airborne Division.

It noted: "In the first month after the US Army's 101st Airborne Division took over security in the vicinity in late fall, roadside bombs killed or wounded more than a quarter of the 34-man platoon." One of the soldiers told the *Post*: "It is definitely more dangerous this time around. I didn't expect to lose so many of my friends so soon."

The article also provided a sense of the destructive psychological impact of the war on American troops. One soldier, when asked how he felt after a roadside bomb killed members of his unit, told the *Post*: "I felt so angry and violated. We all wanted to go and tear up the city. Kick down the doors, shoot the civilians and blow up the mosque."

The combination of a political and a military quagmire has given rise to increasing recriminations within US ruling circles over the conduct of the war. While there is no opposition to the basic war aim—the maintenance of US global hegemony—there is concern that the invasion of Iraq has created more problems rather than ameliorating existing ones.

In 2002, Deputy-Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz arrogantly predicted that just 60,000 US troops would be needed in Iraq within months of an invasion. At the end of 2005, there were 160,000 American troops there, as well as more than 20,000 private contractors and thousands of troops from Britain and other countries.

The death toll of American soldiers stands at over 2,200, with another 16,500 wounded-in-action. A similar number has suffered non-combat injuries or contracted illnesses in Iraq. War expenditure is soaring.

Far from the war diverting social tensions within the US, it has become something of a rallying point for domestic opposition to the Bush administration. Iraq has radicalised a significant layer of the American people, with the movement that developed around Cindy Sheehan being just one example.

Public opposition to the war has also produced a recruitment crisis for the military, with the army last year falling 6,600 short of its enlistment target. As a measure of this crisis, troops are being offered as much as $40,000 to re-enlist.

Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state for the Nixon administration, spelt out some of the concerns in American ruling circles over the growth of antiwar sentiment in a comment published on December 18, 2005 in the *Washington Post*.

Headlined "How to Exit Iraq", Kissinger opposed any withdrawal of US troops to "placate public opinion" and stressed that what was at stake in Iraq was the global position of American capitalism.

He wrote: "Whatever one's view of the decision to undertake the Iraq war, the method by which it was entered, or the strategy by which it was conducted—and I supported the original decision—one must be clear about the consequences of failure. If, when we go, we leave nothing behind but a failed state and chaos, the consequences will be disastrous for the region and for America's position in the world...."

Further on, he continued: "Defeat would shrivel US credibility around the world. Our leadership and the respect accorded to our views on other regional issues from Palestine to Iran would be weakened; the confidence of other major countries—China, Russia, Europe, Japan—in America's potential contribution would be diminished. The respite from military efforts would be brief before even greater crises descended on us."

Spelling out the logic of his arguments, Kissinger concluded: "Americans must accept the reality that their country can never make a total political withdrawal [from Iraq], though the size and location of the military presence will vary...."

Kissinger's comments serve to underscore the fact that the most fundamental interests of US imperialism are involved. That is why, in response to the deepening quagmire, there will inevitably be ever-greater violence perpetrated against the Iraqi people and ever-greater attacks on the democratic rights of the American people.

For all those opposed to this criminal war, the essential question is the development of a socialist perspective. Only such a perspective can provide the basis for a unified struggle against the war by the working people of the United States, of Iraq and the Middle East, and throughout the world.

And we must be clear: the aim of those heading the armed resistance in Iraq is not liberation. Its leaders are predominantly representatives of the Sunni Arab elite who are seeking to use the guerilla war to pressure Washington to make a deal with them. In exchange for official positions and prestige in a US puppet state, they would be more than prepared to collaborate with the American military against their Iraqi rivals and, above all, against the Iraqi people.

The interests of the Iraqi working class—of all ethnic and religious backgrounds—are being subordinated to various bourgeois cliques that have demonstrated, throughout the twentieth century, their venality and their incapacity to conduct any genuine struggle against imperialism.

Over the coming year, the *World Socialist Web Site* must work to develop its influence among opponents of the war, and seek to develop a discussion with those intellectuals and workers in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole who are following our analysis of the US occupation and who want to take forward a genuine struggle against neo-colonialism.

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