

Three years since Bush's "Mission Accomplished": Torture, corruption, growing resistance in Iraq

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May 1 marks three years since President George W. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln for a rally, choreographed by White House spin-doctors, to celebrate "Mission Accomplished" in the US war against Iraq. Organized military resistance by the regime of Saddam Hussein had collapsed. Fewer than 150 American soldiers had been killed in the successful invasion, in which the United States seized control of a country boasting the world's second largest oil reserves.

Fast forward to today: nearly 2,300 more US soldiers have died since Bush declared major combat at end, while the Iraqi death toll has soared to well over 100,000. US efforts to exploit Iraq's oil wealth have been stymied by guerrilla attacks and the corruption and incompetence of the US occupation regime and its Iraqi stooges. The country is sinking into a nightmare of incessant terrorist attacks, indiscriminate US air and ground raids, and ethno-religious civil war.

A series of recent reports have documented the deteriorating security and social conditions in the occupied country. According to a State Department report issued April 28, the number of terrorist attacks in Iraq tripled in 2005, up to 3,500 from 866 in 2004. Another report, by the Government Accountability Office, found that insurgent attacks against American-led forces and infrastructure increased by 23 percent from 2004 to 2005. The GAO found that security conditions were serious or critical in 7 of Iraq's 18 provinces, compared to the usual Bush administration claim that only 4 provinces are in difficulty. Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi said in an interview last week that more than 100,000 people had been displaced from their homes by violence, largely Sunni-versus-Shiite clashes.

The dimensions of the disaster in Iraq are almost incalculable. Last week, for example, four major reports on the state of affairs in Iraq appeared in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, the two leading US newspapers, that document the atrocious consequences of the Bush administration's aggression.

On Monday, April 24, the *Washington Post* published a front-page report on conditions in jails throughout the country run by the Interior Ministry, which is dominated by members of the two largest Shiite militias, the Badr Organization, affiliated with the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Mahdi brigade, loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The article by Ellen Knickmyer reported that since last November, when US soldiers found 173 prisoners, tortured and emaciated, at a secret Interior Ministry bunker in central Baghdad, there have been six further joint US-Iraqi inspections of detention centers. All of these inspections have found evidence of torture or severe abuse. But in a shift in US policy, most of the abused prisoners have not been removed from the detention centers. Instead, they have been left at the mercy of their torturers after some perfunctory warnings.

The inspections only scratched the surface, focusing on 5 of the 1,000 or more detention centers operated by the US-imposed Iraqi government (one center was inspected twice). What was found was just as gruesome as the conditions reported last November. A US military spokesman told Knickmyer: "At one of the sites, thirteen detainees showed signs of abuse that required immediate medical care. The signs of abuse included broken bones, indications that they had been beaten with hoses and wires, signs that they had been hung from the ceiling, and cigarette burns.... There were several cases of physical abuse at one other inspection site. These included evidence of scars, missing toenails, dislocated shoulders, severe bruising, and cigarette burns."

Another US spokesman said that only prisoners whose wounds were fresh, indicating abuse in the days immediately preceding the inspection, were removed to other locations for their own safety. No prisoners were hospitalized for immediate treatment. The result was to leave the vast majority of beaten and tortured men in the hands of their torturers.

As Knickmyer points out, this change in policy underscores the significance of a public dispute between Marine General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. At a November 29 news conference after the first US raid on an Interior Ministry torture center, Pace said that American soldiers encountering such abuse had the obligation to intervene immediately to stop it. Rumsfeld corrected him, declaring, "I don't think you mean they have an obligation to physically stop it; it's to report it." Pace reiterated, "If they are physically present when inhumane treatment is taking place, sir, they have an obligation to try to stop it."

While Pace's remarks reflected the past official policy of the Pentagon, based on the Geneva Convention, Rumsfeld's position has clearly prevailed in practice. This is a further demonstration that the abuses at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, to say nothing of the systematic torture in the Shiite-run detention centers, are not "excesses" committed by "rogue" soldiers. Rather, they are the result of a deliberate Bush administration policy of authorizing and encouraging the torture of prisoners—a war crime under international law.

The April 25 issue of the *New York Times* carried a lengthy examination by James Glanz of the performance of KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton, on a contract to restore the main Iraqi oil pipeline crossing of the Tigris River at a location called Al Fatah, 130 miles north of Baghdad. A key component of the \$2.4 billion no-bid reconstruction contract the Army awarded KBR in 2003, the project came to a halt in the summer of 2004 after expending nearly \$75 million and accomplishing nothing.

The project was required in the first place because US warplanes had destroyed the bridge at Al Fatah that previously carried pipelines that allowed oil from fields near Kirkuk to be pumped west and north into Turkey and then to the world market. An initial plan to rebuild the bridge

was scrapped, and a new method had to be found to carry the pipeline past the river.

KBR decided to dig holes and push pipe under the Tigris, despite warnings from several technical specialists that the terrain was unsuitable. After months of effort, the holes were repeatedly blocked by shifting rock, and the work was ultimately abandoned. According to a report by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, issued in early 2006, “the geological complexities that caused the project to fail were not only foreseeable but predicted.”

The Halliburton subsidiary operated with zero accountability in Iraq thanks to its powerful political protector, Vice President Dick Cheney, the company’s CEO until he joined the Republican ticket in 2000. Even today, after years of reports and exposures of KBR/Halliburton overcharging and non-performance in Iraq, Army Corps of Engineers officials were unwilling to go on record criticizing the company’s work.

But a consultant for the Corps, geologist and former oilman Robert Sanders, told the *Times* about one of the technical reports warning KBR of the unfeasibility of its drilling project at Al Fatah. “You just don’t see a consultant’s report like that that is totally dismissed,” he said. “That put them on notice. When they didn’t take that notice, they accepted what I would call culpable negligence.” Sanders also criticized KBR’s efforts to gag its subcontractors and workers, who were told not to communicate with the Corps except through KBR managers.

Ultimately, the project was re-bid to another group of companies, who decided on a costly but less risky method, dredging part of the river and laying pipeline in the exposed bed, then covering it with concrete. But oil has yet to flow through the Al Fatah crossing, despite well over \$100 million in construction costs.

The April 27 issue of the Washington Post carried a report on the analysis of Iraq war costs by the Congressional Research Service, distributed to members of Congress earlier in the week and then made available to the newspaper. CRS estimated that the cost of the war would reach \$320 billion with passage of the current emergency spending bill, with an additional \$371 billion in phase-out costs even if gradual troop withdrawals begin this year. Add in the costs of the war in Afghanistan and the total rises to \$811 billion, far more than the \$549 billion cost of the Vietnam War, when adjusted for inflation.

Aside from the gargantuan total figure, the most significant finding of this report is the rapid escalation in the costs: \$51 billion in 2003, \$77.3 billion in 2004, \$87.3 billion in 2005, and \$101.8 billion this year. In other words, it is twice as expensive to maintain the occupation of Iraq by 130,000 troops than it was to conquer the country in the first place with a larger number of troops.

These numbers provide a yardstick for measuring the progress of the US counterinsurgency campaign. They demonstrate, first and foremost, that the guerrilla war being waged by Iraqis today, against both the US occupation and the stooge government in Baghdad, is more effective than the military resistance by the regime of Saddam Hussein. It causes more damage and takes more out of the occupying power.

The largest increases are in two categories of spending: operations, maintenance and procurement costs, up from \$50 billion in 2004 to \$88 billion in 2006, mainly because of rising costs of body armor, equipment maintenance and fuel; and in investment costs, which have tripled from 2003, from \$7 billion to \$24 billion, because so much equipment must be replaced—armored vehicles, radios, sensors and other high-tech gear.

There are two other factors that can be inferred though not proven from the CRS numbers. Corruption and profiteering likely account for a disproportionate share of the increased spending. Iraq has become a honey pot for American and foreign military contractors, supplying everything from equipment to bodyguards for enormous profits. In addition, as one military analyst suggested to the *Times*, the Pentagon may well be padding its budget in anticipation of future cuts by congressional appropriators as

public opposition to the war intensifies.

The last of the four articles appeared in Saturday’s Washington Post, It was devoted to the US program to train Iraqi troops in Anbar province, the western region of Iraq, heavily Sunni, which has been the center of armed resistance to the occupation.

Reporter Jonathan Finer describes the efforts of US soldiers in the town of Hawijah, where they train soldiers and policemen recruited from the local population in a seemingly futile effort to “win hearts and minds.” Despite all the differences in terrain, history and military tactics, the politics of occupation is very similar to that in Vietnam 40 years ago.

It is increasingly difficult, Finer explains, for American soldiers to distinguish between friend and foe: “In a town where the local population is hostile to the American presence in Iraq, US soldiers have developed a deep distrust of their Iraqi counterparts following a slew of incidents that suggest the troops they are training are cooperating with their enemies.” One sergeant told Finer, “There’s two kinds of Iraqis here, the ones who help us and the ones who shoot us, and there’s an awful lot of ’em doing both.”

The top local Iraqi army commander was arrested and sent to Abu Ghraib last November, on suspicion of informing insurgents about US convoy routes. Hawijah’s police chief was fired and arrested for alleged refusal to target the insurgents. Some 14 policemen were caught planting roadside bombs, while another 60 police are on the US watch list as suspected insurgents. Presumably all these men are among the 250,000 Iraqi soldiers and policemen that the Bush administration now claims have been trained and deployed.

Even without the daily provocation of US occupation, the conditions in Hawijah, a town of 40,000, would be enough to provoke massive violence. Unemployment is estimated at nearly 90 percent.

The hostility is so open that local police posted a banner on a bridge, in both Arabic and English, declaring that they would not accompany US troops on patrol because the police “existed to protect people and not to protect coalition soldiers.” Finer describes one incident in which the police commander told US officers that the town was quiet. When asked to accompany them on a drive through town, he suddenly “remembers he got a tip about an IED.”

The impact on the US soldiers has been predictable: 11 killed in the 1st Brigade Combat team in its six months of duty. Sixty-four soldiers, nearly 10 percent of the total, have been wounded. Local US commanders were so hard-pressed that they contemplated shifting an Iraqi battalion from Kirkuk, made up largely of Kurds, to help them patrol the Arab town, a measure that risked provoking ethnic civil war.

These are the conditions as described by two newspapers that support the US conquest and occupation of Iraq: the *Post*, openly and brazenly pro-war; and the *Times*, which, despite shamefaced criticism of the Bush administration, nonetheless has insisted that the US maintain its grip on the tortured country to assert its claim to global pre-eminence. Even these pillars of the corporate-controlled media are hard put to find a positive gloss on the wreckage created by American aggression.



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