

A grim milestone in the Iraq war: 2,500th US military death

The Editorial Board
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The death of a US marine Thursday brought to 2,500 the number of American military personnel killed in the war in Iraq. The Pentagon will release the marine's name—along with those of two other American servicemen or women who died that day—24 hours after notification of his family. In a tragic scene that has been replayed over and over again since March 2003, three more families will receive the devastating news that their loved ones have been killed.

This grim milestone of troop deaths is a telling indictment of the criminal character of the US war and occupation of Iraq. In addition to the 2,500 killed, according to Pentagon figures, another 18,490 US troops have been wounded—suffering loss of limbs, brain injuries and other permanent disabilities. Thousands more face severe psychological trauma; innumerable families have been or will be shattered.

Among the most recent American casualties of the US invasion of Iraq were Ben Slaven, 22, of Plymouth, Nebraska (population 450); Jose Velez, 35, of the Bronx, New York; Salvador Guerrero, 21, of Los Angeles; Brent Zoucha, 19, of Merrick County, Nebraska (county population 8,100); Zachary M. Alday, 22, of Donalsonville, Georgia (population 2,700)—all killed on June 9, and Michael A. Estrella, 20, of Hemet, California (the second graduate of Hemet High School to die in Iraq and the 46th soldier from inland Southern California to be killed in Iraq or Afghanistan since the war began in March 2003), who died June 14.

Indifferent to the destruction and misery their policies have produced, and, in any case, not wishing to call public attention to the tragic event, the US political establishment and media downplayed the milestone in Iraq. President George W. Bush made no personal comment on the death count. White House press

secretary Tony Snow merely commented, callously, on his behalf, “It’s a number, and every time there’s one of these 500 benchmarks, people want something,” before adding that the president feels the pain of these families “very deeply.” Snow reiterated that the administration had no intention of bringing any of the US troops home, thus insuring that more young men and women will die.

Army Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, deputy operations chief for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters at the Pentagon on Wednesday, “There is a mission and there is a greater good which sometimes necessitates tremendous sacrifice.”

And the death toll of US soldiers continues to rise with no end in sight; 320 have been killed so far this year alone. The rate of Iraqi casualties has steadily increased. The Iraqi Body Count project (IBC), which, if anything, underestimates civilian casualties, calculates that on average 36 Iraqis a day have met violent deaths in the third year of the war, up from 31 a day in the second year and 20 a day in the first. Studies put the total Iraqi civilian death toll in the war at more than 100,000.

This human carnage—of both Iraqis and Americans—is also a measure of the disaster US imperialism has created for itself 39 months into the war against the population of this Middle Eastern country. Despite these tragic numbers—and with more than \$438 billion spent on the “war on terror”; 70 percent of this spent on Iraq—Washington finds itself more than ever in a military and political quagmire. Three and a third years into the war, the Bush administration points to the latest joint US-Iraqi security crackdown in Baghdad, “Operation Forward Together”—aimed at gaining control of the Iraqi capital—as a sign of success.

In the face of this catastrophe, there is no significant

“peace faction” within either the Democratic or Republican Party demanding the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. In the name of “supporting our troops,” these big business politicians call for continuing the war, guaranteeing that the slaughter of both Iraqis and US troops will continue. They are in fundamental agreement not only with the military operation, but with the reasons the US went to war in the first place—to secure oil resources as well as to advance American geo-strategic interests in the Middle East and internationally.

This bipartisan support for US imperialist policy was demonstrated clearly on Thursday with a 98 to 1 vote in the Senate to authorize another \$66.6 billion in military spending requested by the Bush administration for the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While media attention focused on the raging “debate” in the House of Representatives over the Iraq war, the House had approved the war spending only two days earlier.

The Bush administration, and its nominal “opposition” in the Democratic Party, pursue this policy despite significant and growing opposition within the American population to the war. A new NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll shows 53 percent think the decision to attack Iraq in the first place was wrong and 57 percent say the number of troops should be reduced.

According to this poll, the president’s approval rating stands at just 37 percent, the seventh straight month that his job approval rating has stood below 40 percent. This lack of confidence in the Bush administration, however, does not find any accompanying expression in growing support for the Democratic Party or Congress. A staggering 64 percent of Americans disapprove of Congress’s performance, with only 23 percent approving.

The continual arrival of coffins bearing US soldiers, and the latest figure of 2,500 dead, will undoubtedly continue to fuel this opposition. Added to this is revulsion over revelations of American troops massacring Iraqi civilians in Haditha and Ishaqi, as well as the triple suicide that demonstrated the horrific conditions at the US-run concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay.

Despite the exposure of the lies advanced by the Bush administration for taking the US to war—the Iraqi regime’s possession of “weapons of mass destruction,”

the links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda—there is an overwhelming concurrence of opinion within the US political establishment for the war to continue and more blood to be shed. This is another expression of the growing chasm between the tiny elite that dominates official political life and the mass of the population.

This consensus opinion in favor of Bush’s war policy is widely supported by the print and broadcast media, which, while noting the growing opposition to the war, cautions that the US needs to “stay the course.” Typical was an editorial in Thursday’s *USA Today*, headlined, “Setting a deadline for troops’ withdrawal will backfire,” in which the editors write, “While the war itself was a mistake based on faulty intelligence and delusional optimism, pulling out now...risks making a bad situation worse.”

US troops should remain in Iraq, they continue, “as long as there is a reasonable chance that they can bring some stability, reinforce the fledgling democratic government and prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for terrorists.” There is no such chance for stability under the present conditions—massive, violent foreign occupation and a puppet regime in Baghdad—and no force on earth has contributed more to the growth of terrorism in Iraq than the Bush administration.

The *Detroit Free Press*, in an editorial on Thursday, titled “No Quick Ways Out of Iraq,” was more blunt, writing, “Unfortunately, American forces have some hard fighting to do before their numbers can even be reduced in Iraq. And a complete pullout is years away.”

Every leading institution of the American establishment—political parties, the media, academia—is implicated in the crimes being committed in Iraq. The indifference and contempt within ruling circles for the both the lives of the men and women sent to fight the war and the growing opposition to the war at home was expressed in the lack of any significant coverage of the 2,500th US military death in Iraq. It received scant coverage in the newspapers. After a brief mention on Thursday’s evening news programs, it was largely forgotten by Friday.



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