

Washington debate sets stage for escalation of violence in Iraq

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In the wake of the popular repudiation of the Iraq war in last week's midterm elections, representatives of the US political establishment, both Democratic and Republican, are seeking to work out a new policy that will avert outright defeat and maintain American domination of the oil-rich country.

There are significant tactical divisions within and between both parties, which reflect the scale of the strategic defeat which American imperialism faces in Iraq and the acute contradiction between the sentiments of the majority of the American people—who regard the war as illegitimate—and all factions of the political establishment, who agree that a Vietnam-style defeat in Iraq would be disastrous for the world position of American imperialism.

The divisions within the political elite were on display Sunday on the network television talk shows, as Senator John McCain, the most vehement Republican defender of the war, called for an escalation of violence that would require sending additional troops to Iraq, while Senator Carl Levin, who will chair the Armed Services Committee when the Democrats take control of Congress in January, said that some limited troop withdrawals should begin in “four to six months.”

McCain and Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, the leading Democratic war hawk, appeared on NBC's “Meet the Press” program. McCain, who established an exploratory committee last week to prepare a 2008 presidential campaign, has been vocal in his demand that the US military escalate its operations in Iraq, and particularly in Baghdad, where he has called for “taking out” Moqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Shiite Madhi Army militia.

In his remarks Sunday, McCain elaborated on the consequences of a defeat in Iraq for the US military, saying it would be much worse than Vietnam. “I'm not interested in seeing a scene ... on the roof of the American embassy in Saigon multiplied a thousand-fold.”

He continued: “I believe that a withdrawal, or a date for withdrawal, will lead to chaos in the region, and most military experts think the same thing. I believe that there are a lot of things that we can do to salvage this, but they all require the presence of additional troops.”

His interviewer, NBC's Tim Russert, cited opinion polls showing 82 percent of the American people opposing military escalation in Iraq. He asked, “How can you go to the country after these elections and say, ‘Send more troops to Iraq?’” McCain replied, “I can only do what I think is best for these young men and women who are in the military. To do otherwise would be immoral and dishonorable.”

In other words, morality and honor require defying the democratic will of the American people and ignoring the real interests of both the US soldiers who are dying at the rate of 100 a month and the Iraqi people who are being slaughtered by the thousands every month.

The one tactical shift advocated by McCain was to refocus the US

military effort in Anbar Province and other areas where Sunni insurgents are active, while putting pressure on the US-backed government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to crack down on Shiite militias in Baghdad.

Lieberman was similarly committed to continuing the US military operation in Iraq regardless of popular sentiment. His tactical prescriptions were slightly different from McCain's, as he called for pressuring the Maliki government to “disarm those militias and to bring more Sunnis into a national unity government,” something that an accelerated US military assault in the Sunni provinces would make more difficult, if not impossible.

Lieberman explicitly endorsed the principle, voiced earlier by Bush and reiterated by McCain, that “as elected leaders, we cannot conduct our defense and foreign policy, our national security policy, by public opinion polls.”

Russert asked, “Can you keep a country at war that doesn't want to be there?” Lieberman's answer was revealing. “You can't” he said, “and that's why we need to form a bipartisan consensus for victory in Iraq, for success in Iraq, which is still attainable ... this is the great problem, the terrorists cannot defeat us on the battlefield in Iraq, but we can lose the war here at home if we don't begin to be bipartisan about it and regain the confidence and some hope for the American people.”

Translated into plain language, Lieberman is, in effect, saying: We know that the American people are against the war, and voted that way November 7. We, the political establishment, must adopt a more bipartisan war policy that prevents this antiwar majority from having any voice in the policy debate in Washington. We must use the two-party system to disenfranchise the antiwar majority.

The congressional Democratic leadership is playing its part by staking out a purportedly antiwar position—to placate public opinion—while giving itself abundant room to maneuver and reach an agreement with the Bush administration that allows the war to continue.

Senator Levin, speaking on ABC's “This Week” program, said, “The people have spoken in a very, very strong way that they don't buy the administration policy,” adding, “[W]e need to begin a phased redeployment of forces from Iraq in four to six months.” This statement was headlined in the US media as though it meant a rapid end to the war. Levin's proposal, however, was presented not as a plan to actually withdraw, but as a means of pressuring the Maliki government to do Washington's bidding against the Shiite militias.

Levin's language was endorsed by Senator Joseph Biden, who will head the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the incoming Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, although Reid added the provisos

that no specific dates should be set and that the actual decisions on troop withdrawals should be delegated to US military officers on the ground in Iraq, a formulation that calls into question the principle of civilian control over the military.

Both the congressional Democrats and the Bush administration hope to use the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, a panel headed by former secretary of state James Baker, a long-time Bush family associate, as the vehicle for reaching an agreement on Iraq policy.

Several Republican members of the committee, including Baker himself and Robert Gates, Bush's nominee to replace Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, have been publicly critical of the Bush administration's refusal to negotiate with the regional powers that wield influence in Iraq, including Syria and Iran. Baker has already had direct talks with Iranian and Syrian officials to sound them out on the price for their collaboration. Such expanded diplomacy is likely to be one of the main recommendations of the panel, which met with Bush and Cheney Monday, and meets with the Democratic congressional leadership Tuesday.

A Democratic member of the Iraq Study Group, former Clinton White House chief of staff Leon Panetta, was quoted in Sunday's edition of the *San Jose Mercury-News* as saying that the private assessments government officials gave the panel were much grimmer than those they were making in public. "We left some of those sessions shaking our heads over how bad it is in Iraq," he said.

Whatever consensus emerges from the Iraq Study Group report, expected to be issued before the end of the year, will be based on the combination of military violence and diplomatic maneuver deemed necessary to maintain the US position in Iraq and the larger Middle East. The result will be a continuation, and very likely intensification, of the bloodbath in Iraq.

Such a policy was spelled out in Sunday's editorial in the *New York Times*. Early on, the *Times* endorsed the invasion of Iraq and aided the Bush administration's efforts to intimidate public opinion by providing lurid and unsubstantiated reports of alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. As the US occupation floundered and headed toward disaster, the *Times* adopted a more "critical" posture, all the while holding out the hope that something could be salvaged from the intervention.

In its latest editorial, which rejects calls for an early withdrawal from Iraq, the *Times* states:

"Unless America's exit plans are coupled with a more serious effort to build up Iraq's security forces and mediate its sectarian divisions, a phased withdrawal will only hasten Iraq's descent into civil war—while placing American soldiers who remain behind in even greater danger. We also fear that Iraqis will have no interest in anything but retribution, until they see that security and rebuilding are possible. For that reason we have suggested one last push to stabilize Baghdad. That would require at least a temporary increase in American and Iraqi troops on Baghdad streets."

The *Times*, which articulates, in general terms, the position of the dominant sections of the Democratic Party, proposes to combine the policy of McCain with that of Levin—or rather, the substance of former and the rhetoric of the latter—in order to provide an "antiwar" cover for military escalation.

The same issue of the *Times* featured a major piece by the newspaper's chief correspondent in Iraq, John F. Burns, which spells out approvingly the political measures within Iraq that are being advanced with increasing stridency by policy-makers of both parties. Entitled "Stability vs. Democracy: Could a New Strongman Help?"

the article argues for an abandonment of the "democratic" pretences of the US occupation and the installation of a military strongman to sanction and collaborate in an escalation of US military violence.

Burns, who stands out among the disreputable media propagandists of US imperialism as a particularly dishonest and cynical specimen, presents the plotting of American intelligence and military agencies as a response to the popular will of the Iraqi masses. They are, he asserts, clamoring for military dictatorship:

"Let there be a strongman, they [ordinary Iraqis] say... Let him ride roughshod over the niceties of due process and human rights, indeed over the panoply of democratic institutions America has tried to implant here, if only he can bring peace."

Burns, of course, ignores such made-in-America "democratic institutions" as Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, mass roundups, prison camps and the daily terror and killing that have already claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, as well as recent opinion polls that show a vast majority of Iraqis supporting the immediate withdrawal of American troops.

The *Times* correspondent suggests that the operation be carried out more elegantly than the American-backed coup which removed the US puppet Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam in 1963. "He ended up dead, a bullet in his head, in the rear of an American-made armored personnel carrier outside Saigon's presidential palace," he notes.

Burns adds: "The leading candidate for strongman among secular Iraqis, at least, would be Ayad Allawi, whom the Americans named prime minister in the first post-Hussein government, in 2004. Mr. Allawi, though Shiite, has strong ties with Sunnis, and a reputation as a hard man that goes back to his time as a young Baathist enforcer."

The nomination of this long-time CIA "asset" and notorious killer for the job of US strongman in Iraq underscores the criminal character of the entire US intervention in Iraq, and the complicity of all wings of the American political establishment—liberal and conservative, Democratic and Republican—in the illegal colonialist enterprise, which they are determined to continue, whatever the further cost in Iraqi and American lives.



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