

After the US elections: Renewed pro-war consensus emerges in Washington

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One week ago, in an election broadly acknowledged to have been a referendum on the war in Iraq, the American people made clear their emphatic opposition to the occupation of that country and their desire for the rapid withdrawal of all US forces.

The ensuing seven days have been dominated by intense behind-the-scenes political debate and maneuvering within the Washington elite, all of it devoted to shoring up the strategic interests of American imperialism in the Middle East, ensuring the continuation for the foreseeable future of military operations in Iraq, and frustrating popular anti-war sentiment within the US.

However sharp the differences within the political establishment over the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq—and more generally its reckless and ignorant approach to complex problems of foreign policy—no substantial section of the ruling elite is prepared to countenance a withdrawal of US forces under conditions where such action would be seen as a military defeat and represent a devastating setback to the regional and global interests of American imperialism.

The internal debates within the policy-making establishment—Democratic and Republican—are aimed at forging a new strategic consensus on the future conduct of American policy in the Middle East. While the depth of anti-war sentiment expressed in last week's elections came as something of a shock to both parties, their leaders are not in the least inclined to allow the attitude of the broad mass of the American people determine the foreign policy objectives of the United States.

There is an acute recognition that the official debate on the war in Iraq must not provide an opening for the legitimization of popular demands for the immediate withdrawal of US forces. At the same time, there is a palpable fear that the status-quo—as represented by the policies pursued by the Bush administration—is not viable. Certain changes—though what they are remains unclear—must be made.

As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman expressed it in a column published November 8, "This needs to be our last election about Iraq." The war, he warned, "has turned into a sucking chest wound for our country—inflicting its unity at home and its standing abroad."

While a degree of disorientation characterized the initial reaction of the political establishment to the elections, mechanisms are being quickly put in place to create a new foundation for the underlying objectives of the Iraq war. Of these, the Iraq Study Group stands out as the principal focus for a reorientation of Iraq policy.

The prospect of any withdrawal of US troops from Iraq is quickly being removed from the framework of discussion. On Wednesday, General John Abizaid, commander of US forces in the Middle East, argued against any troop withdrawal in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He suggested instead that an increase in troop strength might be needed.

On Wednesday, the *New York Times*, the major newspaper of American liberalism, which has long called for an increase in troop numbers in Iraq,

published a front-page story entitled "Get Out Now? Not So Fast, Experts Say." The purpose of the article was to provide a forum for current and former military officers to oppose the position of some Democrats, including Senator Carl Levin, who will chair the Senate Armed Services Committee in the new Congress, that the US should threaten to begin withdrawing some troops in four to six months.

The suggestions of Levin and others have been advanced not as serious proposals for withdrawing US forces, but rather as a means of pressuring different factions of the Iraqi elite to reach some accommodation on the sharing of oil revenues and the repression of opposition to the American occupation. Even this position, however, is being quickly sidelined.

Meanwhile, John Murtha, who is contending for the position of majority leader of the House of Representatives and is associated in the mind of the public with his earlier call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops, is being attacked in the media for his involvement in a corruption scandal that occurred 26 years ago. Murtha's position on Iraq, in any case, has received virtually no support from within either the Democratic or Republican parties.

Pressure on the Bush administration to shift policy on Iraq is currently focused on the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan commission set up by members of Congress. By forging some sort of compromise between the two parties, a central aim of the Iraq Study Group is to remove the question of Iraq from political discussion even as the occupation continues.

Anyone who believes that the Iraq Study Group will produce recommendations leading to an end to the Iraq war need only look at its origins and composition. The group was established in March 2006 at the behest of a number of congressmen, particularly Republicans, who had become concerned about the crisis in the US occupation. The group also won the support of prominent Democrats, including senators Joseph Biden and Hillary Clinton.

The membership of the Iraq Study Group consists primarily of senior strategists in both parties. It is co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. While secretary of state under the senior George Bush, Baker helped oversee the 1991 Gulf war, the first stage in a policy of American intervention that has produced a catastrophe for the Iraqi people.

Hamilton, a Democratic congressman for 34 years before he left Congress in 1999, played a critical role in blocking an investigation into the role of Ronald Reagan and the senior Bush, then the vice president, in the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s. As vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission, Hamilton helped whitewash the role of government officials and agencies in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The other members of the ten-member commission (five Republicans and five Democrats) have similar histories. Three served under President Clinton, including Vernon Jordan, former presidential advisor, Leon Panetta, former White House chief of staff, and William Perry, former defense secretary. They were part of an administration that oversaw a brutal sanctions regime coupled with periodic bombings, resulting in the

deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians. The other Democrat is former Senator Chuck Robb.

The Republicans include Lawrence Eagleburger, a former secretary of state under the senior Bush and member of the board of directors of Halliburton and ConocoPhillips, Edwin Meese, attorney general under Ronald Reagan and prominent conspirator in the Iran-Contra affair, former Senator Alan Simpson, and former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

Eagleburger is a protégé of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—a connection that should be noted since Kissinger remains a close adviser to President Bush and is adamantly opposed to a pullout from Iraq. Eagleburger took over the position of Robert Gates, who resigned from the Iraq Study Group when he was selected by Bush to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. Gates was deputy director of the CIA under Reagan, at a time when the CIA was funding Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, in a proxy war with the Soviet Union.

All of these individuals have blood on their hands. All are ardent defenders of the interests of American imperialism.

Representatives of the group have been tight-lipped on what options it is considering. However, it is not difficult to gain an idea of the direction in which it is leaning by considering the recommendations being advanced by different sections of the political establishment.

According to a *Washington Post* article of November 9, “The Baker-Hamilton study group is not expected to call for pulling out of Iraq quickly. Rather, insiders say, the most likely recommendation will be to curtail the goal of democratizing Iraq and instead emphasize stability. That might entail devoting more resources to training and equipping Iraq’s military, perhaps by radically increasing the size of the US training and advisory effort.”

“To curtail the goal of democratizing Iraq” is a euphemism for turning to sections of the old Sunni elite to help crush opposition from sections of the Shiite population. There is much talk behind the scenes of replacing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who has close ties to the Shiite militias, including that of Moqtada al-Sadr, with an Iraqi “strongman.” In one of his few public comments, Baker recently gave a speech at Princeton University in which he warned, “We ought not to think we’re going to see a flowering of Jeffersonian democracy along the banks of the Euphrates.”

One of the most likely scenarios is the introduction of more troops in order to carry out a major offensive against the Shiite population in Baghdad’s Sadr City. This policy has been supported openly by Republican Senator John McCain and others.

The broader issues under consideration concern US policy toward other states in the Middle East, particularly Iran, Syria and Israel.

A turn towards Iran and Syria to help stabilize the Iraq occupation is one of the principal options being considered by the Iraq Study Group. Such a move would have to be coupled with concessions from Israel and would also involve concessions to European and Russian influence in the Middle East, since these powers have established close ties to Iran in the absence of any American involvement in the country.

It is notable that among the ten principal members of the Iraq Study Group, there are no representatives of the neo-conservative faction of the ruling elite, which is associated with such figures as Vice President Dick Cheney and soon-to-depart Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. This faction believes that American interests in the Middle East can be best defended through an escalation of military action, particularly against Iran, a policy that coincides with the Israeli aim of regime change in Tehran.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Washington earlier this week and obtained from Bush a commitment to continue efforts to isolate Iran.

On Tuesday, the Bush administration announced that it would establish a separate panel under its own auspices that would issue recommendations

in mid-December, around the same time as the Iraq Study Group. This panel, likely to be set up under the direction of Cheney, will be used as a counterweight to the Iraq Study Group. It will speak for those sections of the establishment who believe that the best way to respond to the debacle in Iraq is to expand military action to Iran.

In the aftermath of the elections, American working people should grant no credibility to the discussions in Washington. Whatever decision is worked out by the political establishment on strategy in the Middle East, it will be based on the defense of the interests of American imperialism. The official debate is not over whether the Iraq occupation should continue or whether violence should be used to crush the Iraqi popular resistance—on these questions all factions are agreed. The differences revolve around the extent to which diplomacy should be used as a supplement to military force, and the relationship of the US to the different states in the region.

The Democrats have made clear their real attitude to the war by immediately ruling out a cut-off of funding for the Iraq occupation—something they would be in a position to do in the new Democratic Congress simply by using one of its principal powers: the power of the purse. They have likewise made known their readiness to follow the proposals of the Iraq Study Group as part of an attempt to reach a compromise with the Bush administration on Iraq policy.

The invasion of Iraq was engineered to secure fundamental interests of the American ruling elite. While there have always been differences over how the Bush administration launched the invasion—too few troops, insufficient international support, etc.—the basic aim of securing American domination in the Middle East was and continues to be supported by every significant faction of the political establishment.

No end to the bloodshed in Iraq is possible as long as American troops remain in that country. The catastrophe that has overtaken the Iraqi people is the result of their country’s tragic encounter with the United States over the last quarter century: the American encouragement of Iraq’s disastrous invasion of Iran in the 1980s, the US invasion of Iraq in 1991, twelve years of punishing economic sanctions, and finally the invasion and subsequent occupation. These are the events that have led to the virtual disintegration of Iraqi society.

Given this history, immediate and total American withdrawal from Iraq is the absolute precondition for stopping the violence that is consuming the country.



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