

The war in Iraq and American democracy

The Editorial Board
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The Bush administration's decision to press ahead with the escalation of the war in Iraq, despite overwhelming public opposition and increasing criticism in Congress, demonstrates the extent to which the executive branch of the US government now functions as an unaccountable force, disregarding the checks and balances of the traditional constitutional structure and ignoring public opinion.

Bush's claims to be fighting a war to establish democracy in Iraq are belied by the fact that his administration is shredding what remains of democratic institutions in the United States and arrogating to itself unprecedented powers to intercept telephone and email communications, authorize torture, spy on political opponents of the war, and arrest and imprison US residents without trial.

The comments of Vice President Cheney on January 14 sum up the anti-democratic posture of this government. He dismissed the significance of the mass antiwar vote in the November congressional elections, telling his interviewer, "Fox News Sunday" host Chris Wallace, "I don't think any president worth his salt can afford to make decisions of this magnitude according to the polls."

In all previous wars waged by American imperialism over past 100-plus years, US administrations have found it necessary to mobilize public opinion behind their military efforts. An elaborate system of political provocations and media scare tactics was developed to generate support for war among the American people.

In the Spanish-American War of 1898, a press campaign against atrocities by the Spanish colonial authorities in Cuba reached its crescendo with the explosion of the battleship USS Maine in Havana harbor, portrayed as an act of war, although it was likely due to mechanical causes.

The Wilson administration paved the way to US entry into World War I with a years-long campaign over German submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean, using such events as the sinking of the Lusitania, an American passenger ship carrying ammunition to Great Britain.

Franklin Roosevelt required many months of political maneuvering even to obtain support for US military aid to Britain, in the form of the Lend-Lease program, in the early stages of World War II. Only the Japanese attack on Pearl

Harbor created the political conditions for overcoming the deep-seated popular opposition to entering the conflagration.

US entry into the Korean War was made possible by a media campaign portraying the outbreak of civil war as an invasion of South Korea by North Korea. In Vietnam, the notorious "Gulf of Tonkin incident" was manufactured by the Johnson administration as the justification for escalating the US intervention from 15,000 to over 500,000 troops.

Before the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the first Bush administration tacitly encouraged Saddam Hussein's invasion and annexation of Kuwait, then utilized it as a *casus belli*.

The second Bush administration falsely linked Iraq to the 9/11 terror attacks, and combined this with bogus claims that Iraq had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction that it would hand over to terrorists to use against the American people.

Now, however, the Bush administration has embarked on a major escalation of the war, one which seems intended not so much to win a military victory on the ground in Iraq as to lay the basis for expansion of the war to Iran and Syria, under conditions in which all of its previous and shifting rationales are discredited.

It does so after three-and-a-half years of war and after the American people have expressed in unmistakable terms their desire for an end to the war and the withdrawal of US troops. Ordinary Americans have taken the measure of the official lies and propaganda and rejected all the old pretexts. They know that the claims of a 9/11 connection and weapons of mass destruction were false.

According to a recent poll, fully 50 percent believe that Bush deliberately lied to the American people in order to justify the war. In other words, they believe that Bush is responsible for what under international law is a war crime—waging a war of aggression.

The conclusions drawn by the American people were expressed at the ballot box last November. In the only forum where the official political structure permits them to express their opinions, millions of people voted for Democratic congressional candidates, not because they had great confidence in the Democratic Party, but because they wanted

to voice their opposition to the Bush administration and the war in Iraq.

The response of Bush, Cheney & Co. has been to abandon any serious effort to manipulate or sway public opinion and to declare, as Cheney did last Sunday, that the job of the president is to ignore public opinion and wage war in defiance of it.

It is worth considering once again the exact language used by Cheney in his interview.

WALLACE: Iraq was a big issue in the November election. I want you to take a look at some numbers from the election. According to the National Exit Poll, 67 percent said the war was either very or extremely important to their vote, and only 17 percent supported sending in more troops. By taking the policy you have, haven't you, Mr. Vice President, ignored the express will of the American people in the November election?

CHENEY: Well, Chris, this president, and I don't think any president worth his salt, can afford to make decisions of this magnitude according to the polls. The polls change day by day . . .

WALLACE: Well, this was an election, sir.

CHENEY: Polls change day by day, week by week. I think the vast majority of Americans want the right outcome in Iraq. The challenge for us is to be able to provide that. But you cannot simply stick your finger up in the wind and say, "Gee, public opinion's against; we'd better quit."

Cheney dismisses the outcome of the election as irrelevant to the policies of the government. Contained here is a view of government that is antithetical to any conception of democracy.

Cheney went on to explain the considerations of imperialist strategy that require ignoring the election result. This is what he told Wallace:

"That is part and parcel of the underlying fundamental strategy that our adversaries believe afflicts the United States. They are convinced that the current debate in the Congress, that the election campaign last fall, all of that, is evidence that they're right when they say the United States doesn't have the stomach for the fight in this long war against terror. They believe it.

"They look at past evidence of it: in Lebanon in '83 and Somalia in '93, Vietnam before that. They're convinced that the United States will, in fact, pack it in and go home if they just kill enough of us. They can't beat us in a stand-up fight, but they think they can break our will.

"And if we have a president who looks at the polls and sees the polls are going south and concludes, 'Oh, my goodness, we have to quit,' all it will do is validate the Al Qaeda view of the world. It's exactly the wrong thing to do. This president does not make policy based on public opinion

polls; he should not. It's absolutely essential here that we get it right."

The American people, Cheney maintains, cannot be trusted to have "the stomach" for the measures required to secure continued US control over Iraq and its vast oil resources. The president, therefore, must substitute himself for the people. Or as Brecht remarked, when the people turn against the regime, the regime must elect a new people.

Nor is the Democratic Party any alternative to this flat rejection of popular sovereignty.

The Democratic "alternative" as voiced by Hillary Clinton and set down in the Senate resolution disapproving US military escalation is anything but an authentic expression of the mass opposition to the war.

The text of the resolution embraces the strategic orientation of the Bush administration, declaring that "maximizing chances of success in Iraq should be our goal," while quarreling with the tactics. As for Clinton, she declared herself in favor of sending more troops to Afghanistan rather than Iraq, and opposed to any cutoff of funds either for the escalation or the existing occupation.

"I'm not going to cut American troops' funding right now—they're in harm's way," Clinton told the press, words that were repeated by virtually every Democratic spokesperson, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in a television interview Friday morning.

The Democrats define their goal in Iraq as achieving "success," a term of convenient vagueness. What it really means is maintaining US control over the oil resources of the Middle East.

In order to continue and escalate the fight for this goal, which is supported by both of its parties, the US ruling elite must move against popular sentiment and rule undemocratically. Conversely, the antiwar majority must move to build an independent political party of the working class, rejecting both the Democrats and Republicans and striving to unite working people internationally against imperialist war and the capitalist system that produces it.



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