

A letter on popular opinion, the media, and Bush's plans for escalation in Iraq

27 January 2007

The following letter was sent by a WSWS reader in response to the article, "In defiance of 2006 vote, Bush will escalate Iraq war"

To the Editor,

The WSWS often observes that certain powerfully-felt and broadly-held convictions of the US population are rarely permitted expression by the mass media or through the channels of official politics. Such sentiments would include, for example, the ideas that the Iraq war is "immoral and unjust," that the US is guilty of war crimes, or that President Bush is "a liar" or "a criminal." Such sentiments are not granted recognition in the nation's political life, not because they're untrue, but rather because they strike too closely at the heart of what one might call the official propaganda system.

On January 10, the night of Bush's troop-escalation speech, there occurred at least two telling (if fleeting) exceptions to this general denial of the existence of widespread popular anger at the ruling establishment.

One of these exceptions was entirely involuntary, occurring as part of CNN's televised coverage. Right after the speech, CNN went live to a female "reporter" in front of the White House, supposedly seeking comment and reaction. Because the reporter was out of doors, one could clearly hear antiwar protesters screaming angrily and forcefully right behind her. She tried to pretend they weren't there, in no way deigning to even acknowledge their existence. The protesters were screaming so loudly that it was difficult to hear everything the reporter was saying (she was in fact engaged in the usual parroting of remarks made by various officials and military authorities, every one of whom was pro-war, though not necessarily pro-escalation). Yet she soldiered on, as though hewing to an unspoken law that if something wasn't said by a Republican, Democrat or Pentagon spokesman, it wasn't worth mentioning.

The other brief exception to the usual pattern of tight media control of "expressible thought" occurred, of all places, on the *New York Times*' web site. Immediately following the speech, the *Times* front-paged several articles' worth of coverage, and invited readers to post comments on

the *Times*' "blog." Readers were asked to respond to the question, "Did President Bush in his speech to the nation on Wednesday night make a convincing case for sending more US troops to Iraq?" Readers were advised that the blog was a "moderated forum," meaning the *Times* presumably intended to screen all comments before allowing them to be published.

The web page reserved for responses was at <http://news.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=125>, and as of this writing (January 16), the page remains online and viewable. Responses started coming in immediately following the speech, and it was possible to post comments for roughly the next 29 hours, after which time one could still view the page, but could no longer contribute remarks. A total of 933 comments were made, most of them naturally by US readers, with some by responders from other countries as well.

In their aggregate, the readers' comments are fascinating and deeply instructive. There is a rich irony in the fact that they reveal far more of the public's real feelings towards the Bush administration and the current US wars of aggression than the *Times* itself would ever acknowledge in the course of its daily news coverage, editorials, and letters to the editor. The gulf dividing elite opinion from the sentiments of ordinary citizens is recorded vividly here.

After reading the first few dozen responses, I found them so engrossing that I proceeded to read all 933 comments. Below, I'll attempt to summarize the gist of what I saw, though I readily admit that my summary is based on only a few precise counts; and otherwise, unavoidably, on subjective estimates.

Over 95 percent of all responses opposed Bush's troop escalation, many strongly, even angrily. Many of these opinions were grounded mainly in concern for the well-being of the troops and their families. Many were grounded principally in fears that the escalation would not "succeed in achieving its goals." (Of these, many noted that if Bush were serious about confronting "the decisive ideological struggle of our time," a mere 15 percent increase in the number of troops would seem inadequate, and that the numbers themselves therefore belied the language of Bush's

attempted justifications.) But a clear majority of responders expressed the view that the war is immoral, that's it's mainly a war for control of oil, that it's murderous, and that it's based on a pack of lies.

This seems quite remarkable, considering that the US ruling establishment and its media surrogates never permit public airing of the idea that the war is for oil, and savagely attack the occasional figure who dares to say that it is.

A great many responses express deep hatred of Bush, and frank loathing for his government. About 6 percent of all posts explicitly say that now it's time for impeachment proceedings to begin, or recommend mass marches on Washington. (This last figure is fairly precise—I searched the page for the word “impeachment.”) Many posts called Bush a “war criminal,” a “sociopath,” a rich spoiled brat, a liar, and the like. One refers to Bush as a “despicable tyrant,” as bad as Saddam; another calls Cheney “dangerous as a rattlesnake.” Numerous posts express heartfelt anguish and despair. More than a few compare the Bush administration to the Hitler regime. Many express that the author “never would have believed that this could happen in our country.” Numerous posts explicitly say that Bush's open defiance of Congress and the popular will, as expressed by last November's elections, means that the US has in effect already devolved into a dictatorship.

One poster, identifying himself as a PhD from Cornell, explicitly mentions the WSWS, describing the Socialist Equality Party as the only hope for building a “party responsible to the people.”

There are numerous posts by people who admit they voted for Bush, but say they are sorry or ashamed of having done so. Shame for what America has become is a theme prominently echoed throughout the list.

Many posters say that the Bush twins should be sent to fight in Iraq, before anyone should take seriously Bush's call for additional troops. There is a widespread awareness that the sons and daughters of privileged parents do not share the burdens of the war.

On the other hand, even among posters critical of both Bush and his escalation proposal, one common mindset seen in the list is the notion that people in the Middle East naturally enjoy killing each other, and have been doing little else for thousands of years, so it's foolish of Bush to be putting our noble soldiers in the middle of all this. Rather (these posters feel) “we” should just pull our soldiers out, and let them go on killing each other without us.

Here, one can't help but feel, the constant barrage of disinformation, lies and distortion to which the US media consumer is daily subjected has taken its toll. Even among Bush critics, there is unfortunately a quite noticeable constituency for bedrock US propaganda concepts such as

the notion that “our” soldiers are always noble, and that Middle Easterners are basically savages who just can't stop killing one another.

There are a few posts by still-loyal Republicans, who complain of the “liberal media,” and echo Bush's claims of the necessity to “fight 'em over there so we don't have to fight 'em here.” Some of these are nasty and belligerent in tone, while others simply express traditional American notions of the need to “support our leaders in a time of war.”

Unquestionably, however, the main impression one carries away from examination of this blog page is that the general public is far, far ahead of all official sources, in their thinking about the war. Most responders regard the war as criminal, despise Bush for having started it, and are feeling genuine alarm about the increasingly ominous trajectory of world events. Many understand clearly that the war is at root a struggle for global hegemony, and for control of oil resources. Many see that war-profiteering plays a major role. Many see that core constitutional principles have been trampled upon.

It's remarkable, when one considers the intensity of the daily propaganda barrage, that so many American citizens accurately perceive this much of the big picture. It's doubly remarkable and deeply ironic that such strong evidence of this fact should manifest itself on a blog owned and managed by the *New York Times*, a newspaper whose work largely consists of denying the realities perceived by these citizens, and trying to block them from perceiving what they clearly already see.

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