

# John McCain at VMI: A blunt statement of US imperialism's stake in Iraq

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The speech delivered by Senator John McCain Wednesday at the Virginia Military Institute sheds light on the deepening crisis of the entire US political establishment over the worsening position of the US occupation regime and the growth of mass popular opposition to the war.

While McCain's speech was portrayed by the media as an attempt to revive his faltering presidential campaign by appealing to the hard core of Republican Party supporters of the war, the event had a broader significance. McCain's remarks encapsulated the contradictions wracking the US ruling elite.

The speech was a string of lies and distortions, in its depiction of the causes of the war and the current conditions in Iraq, combined with the assertion of a brutal truth: that American imperialism cannot and will not accept defeat in this war, regardless of the sentiments of the great majority of the Iraqi and American people.

McCain embraced wholeheartedly the ideological framework of the Iraq war as it is currently presented by the Bush administration: The United States invaded Iraq to "liberate" its people from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. As a result, Iraq has become the focal point of the worldwide "war on terror" launched by the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

This is a version of history that bears no relation to reality. The Bush administration invaded Iraq claiming that Saddam Hussein controlled stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction that he was prepared to share with his supposed allies, the terrorists of Al Qaeda, for use against the United States. It was on this basis that the war was sold to the American people, with the assistance of the Democratic Party leadership and the corporate-controlled media.

It was only after the conquest and occupation of Iraq turned up not a single weapon of mass destruction, and produced no evidence of ties between Al Qaeda and Hussein, who were, in fact, political enemies, that the Bush administration shifted its propaganda. It now claimed, notwithstanding its longstanding and continuing alliances with such despots as the Saudi and Gulf oil sheiks and Egyptian President Mubarak, that its real goal was to liberate the Iraqi people from the tyranny of the Baathist regime and spread democracy throughout the Middle East.

McCain obediently followed the White House script. There was no mention in his speech of WMD, nor any effort to explain why this pretext for war had been discarded in favor of one equally phony. "America has a vital interest in preventing the emergence of Iraq as a Wild West for terrorists, similar to Afghanistan before

9/11," he declared. "By leaving Iraq before there is a stable Iraqi governing authority we risk precisely this, and the potential consequence of allowing terrorists sanctuary in Iraq is another 9/11 or worse."

McCain claimed the US government had a moral responsibility to stay in Iraq to prevent "genocide and ethnic cleansing," warning that a premature withdrawal could lead to a bloodbath worse than Rwanda. He naturally ignored estimates, such as that produced by a public health survey conducted under the auspices of Johns Hopkins University, that the death toll produced by the American intervention in Iraq already rivals that in Rwanda. The casualties will rise even more rapidly under conditions of American military escalation.

In describing conditions today in Iraq, McCain retreated only slightly from the gushing enthusiasm he voiced during last week's much-criticized visit to a Baghdad market. While verbally deploring false optimism, he gave an account of "progress" in Iraq that was far rosier than anything emanating from the US military in recent weeks.

He touched on, in passing, the real material interests underlying the war, Iraq's vast oil resources, noting, "A plan to share oil revenues equitably among all Iraqis has been approved by Iraqi ministers and is pending approval by the parliament." This was a reference to the agreement of the Maliki government, under enormous US pressure, to pass legislation that would turn over control of Iraq's oilfields to private (i.e., American) corporations.

It was when he turned to the consequences of a US defeat in Iraq, however, that McCain reached full stride, giving a grim but essentially realistic appreciation of the scale of the strategic disaster now confronting American imperialism. "A power vacuum in Iraq would invite further interference from Iran," he said. "If the government collapses in Iraq, which it surely will if we leave prematurely, Iraq's neighbors, from Saudi Arabia, to Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Egypt, will feel pressure to intervene on the side of their favored factions ... We could face a terrible choice: watch the region burn, the price of oil escalate dramatically and our economy decline, watch the terrorists establish new base camps or send American troops back to Iraq, with the odds against our success much worse than they are today."

This is a clear and blunt statement of the consequences of defeat, to which it could be added that the failure of the Bush administration to accomplish its goal of gaining control of the oil resources of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia will embolden rival

capitalist powers, from Western Europe to Russia and China, and severely undermine the drive by US imperialism to establish its hegemony in every corner of the globe.

There is no question that virtually the entire US political establishment, both Democrats and Republicans, agree with this assessment of the consequences of defeat in Iraq. The bitter divisions within the ruling elite revolve around how to avoid such a defeat or minimize its impact, and who will pay the price for the debacle.

McCain represents that faction of the ruling elite that is the most ruthless and single-minded in its refusal to admit or accept defeat, and which regards redoubled efforts at the military subjugation of Iraq—including the extermination of a large portion of the Iraqi population—as the only viable option.

“America should never undertake a war unless we are prepared to do everything necessary to succeed,” he declared. The logic of this position—clearly derived from the bitter experience of the US defeat in Vietnam—is that all methods, including mass murder and possibly the use of nuclear weapons, are permissible and legitimate in pursuit of “success.”

This ruthlessness and determination to escalate the bloodbath in Iraq have cost McCain considerable popular support. In the opinion polls, his standing has fallen sharply. Last year he was the presumptive Republican frontrunner, but the most recent poll shows him trailing not only former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, but also former senator and current television actor Fred Thompson, who has not even announced his candidacy.

Even more decisive than the “money primary,” where McCain has fallen to third place among Republicans, is the effort to win backing in key decision-making circles in Washington and in the corporate and financial oligarchy. Here McCain possesses a definite following, signaled by the extraordinary endorsement of his campaign this week by four former Republican secretaries of state: Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Lawrence Eagleburger and Alexander Haig.

All four are deeply implicated in past crimes of American imperialism, and, despite occasional criticisms of the Bush administration’s ineptness in Iraq, they fully support efforts to win a military victory and crush the resistance of the Iraqi people to foreign occupation. Their support is a signal that, whatever his current standing in the polls, McCain may well emerge as the choice of the ruling elite for the Republican presidential nomination.

It is the very unpopularity of McCain’s views on the war that recommends him to the financial oligarchy. The *Wall Street Journal*, in an editorial Wednesday declaring the forthcoming speech “McCain’s Finest Hour,” called attention to an exchange between Scott Pelley of CBS and McCain on Sunday’s “60 Minutes” program.

Pelley asked, referring to the growth of opposition to the Iraq war, “At what point do you stop doing what you think is right and you start doing what the majority of the American people want?” McCain responded, “I disagree with what the majority of the American people want.” The *Journal* hailed this response—which essentially rejects popular sovereignty as the basis of democracy—as a courageous stand on principle.

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks articulated the view of considerable sections of the ruling elite in an op-ed piece published Thursday. “In the long run” he wrote, “his [McCain’s] embrace of Iraq may not hurt him as much as now appears. In 10 months, this election won’t be about the surge, it will be about the hydra-headed crisis roiling the Middle East. The candidate who is the most substantive, most mature and most consistent will begin to look more attractive and more necessary.”

The anti-democratic implications of McCain’s defense of the war became evident in the closing portion of his speech, where he seemingly echoed the red-baiting senator Joseph McCarthy, denouncing congressional Democrats as defeatists and allies of terrorists. Citing the applause by House Democrats after the passage, by a narrow 218-212 vote, of a resolution setting a deadline for withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq, McCain asked, “What were they celebrating? Defeat? Surrender?”

Actually, the Democrats were celebrating their success at squaring the circle: passing a nominally “antiwar” resolution that would do nothing to restrict US military operations in Iraq. The major goal of the congressional Democrats is to provide the semblance of opposition to the war without the substance.

To do this, they have flatly rejected the only two mechanisms provided under the US constitution to restrain presidential military action: impeachment or the cutting off of military appropriations. They adopted this straitjacket quite deliberately, as part of their dual purpose of sustaining the war while keeping antiwar voters within the confines of the two-party system.

McCain, of course, is well aware that the Democratic leaders in Congress are just as committed to the defense of American imperialism as he is. When he was not a candidate, in the 2004 presidential campaign, he defended Democratic nominee John Kerry against Republican attacks that all but accused Kerry of treason and giving aid and comfort to the terrorists. But now, for his own purposes, he waves the bloody shirt of 9/11, suggesting that opposition to the war in Iraq constitutes a capitulation to terrorism.

His “terrorist-baiting” of the Democrats is more than just an effort to curry favor with the fascistic right-wing base of the Republican Party, which has yet to rally behind any of the announced Republican candidates. It is an effort to smear and delegitimize the genuine mass popular opposition to the war. It represents an assurance to the US ruling elite that in McCain they have a candidate who is prepared to ride roughshod over public opinion and, if he enters the White House, continue the Bush administration’s policy of military aggression indefinitely.



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