

The New York Times and the crisis of American imperialism in Iraq

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The *New York Times* on Sunday published a major statement on the war in Iraq. Running the entire length of the newspaper's editorial page, the statement was clearly conceived of as a definitive pronouncement on the failure of the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq and the assertion of an alternative policy.

The editorial is an expression of the enormity of the crisis facing the US ruling elite. In its own way, the statement acknowledges that what was intended to be a demonstration of American might—the conquest of Iraq—has dealt a shattering blow to the US drive for global hegemony.

Exuding a sense of hopelessness and despair, riddled with internal contradictions, raising more questions than it answers, the editorial reflects more than anything else the perplexity of the US political establishment in the face of a catastrophe of its own making.

Beginning with its title, “The Road Home,” the statement reveals as well the duplicity of the Democratic Party and the liberal wing of the political establishment for which the *Times* speaks. As one reads the statement, it becomes clear that the newspaper is not really calling for a withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, but rather a redeployment leading to a permanent US military presence in Iraq and an expansion of American forces in the region. Such is the real content of the alternative to the Bush administration's policy being promoted by the Democratic Party in the name of “ending the war.”

The editorial begins with the somber assertion: “It is time for the United States to leave Iraq, without any more delay than the Pentagon needs to organize an orderly exit.”

It continues: “Like many Americans, we have put off that conclusion, waiting for a sign that President Bush was seriously trying to dig the United States out of the disaster created by invading Iraq without sufficient cause, in the face of global opposition, and without a plan to stabilize the country afterward.”

In fact, as the editorial later admits, the majority of the American people reached the conclusion that the war must be ended months ago. That was the unambiguous meaning of the Republican rout in the November, 2006 congressional elections, and since then opinion polls have shown an ever-rising tide of antiwar sentiment.

In the course of its ensuing attempt at a balance sheet of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the *Times* editorial paints a picture of devastation and chaos in Iraq and recklessness, irresponsibility and criminality in the highest echelons of the US government that amounts to a colossal indictment of not only the Bush administration, but the entire political and media establishment of which the *Times* is a part.

Among the facts listed in the course of the statement are the following: the United States has destroyed “Iraq's government, army, police and economic structures;” the “security forces Washington has trained behave more like partisan militias;” civil war in Iraq “is raging, right now, and it may take years to burn out;” a “slow-motion ethnic and religious cleansing... has contributed to driving one in seven Iraqis from their homes;” there are “already nearly two million Iraqi refugees, mostly in

Syria and Jordan, and nearly two million more who have been displaced within their country.”

The penultimate paragraph of the editorial states: “President Bush and Vice President Cheney have used demagoguery and fear to quell Americans' demands for an end to this war. They say withdrawing will create bloodshed and chaos and encourage terrorists. Actually, all of that has already happened—the result of this unnecessary invasion and the incompetent management of this war.”

Far more important to the *Times* than the devastation of Iraqi society are the disastrous consequences of the war for American imperialism. Even as it excoriates the Bush administration for its failed policy in Iraq, the newspaper uncritically upholds the overarching political framework and pretext for the war and the broader eruption of American militarism—the so-called “war on terrorism.”

On this score, the editorial asserts that Bush's stated goal of “building a stable, unified Iraq” is “lost;” acknowledges that “additional military forces poured into the Baghdad region have failed to change anything;” complains that the war “is sapping the strength of the nation's alliances and its military forces;” warns that it has given Al Qaeda “new base camps, new recruits and new prestige;” and declares that it has “alienated essential allies in the war against terrorism.”

When the *Times* turns to proposing a way out of the Iraq quagmire the perplexity and disorientation gripping the American ruling establishment emerge even more palpably. It soon becomes clear that the newspaper has no coherent policy to reconfigure US forces in Iraq while averting a disastrous defeat for US imperialism.

It begins by acknowledging that its proposals could very well exacerbate the bloodbath in Iraq and lead to a fracturing of the country along sectarian lines.

“When Congress returns this week,” the *Times* writes, “extricating American troops from the war should be at the top of its agenda.

“That conversation must be candid and focused. Americans must be clear that Iraq, and the region around it, could be even bloodier and more chaotic after Americans leave. There could be reprisals against those who worked with American forces, further ethnic cleansing, even genocide. Potentially destabilizing refugee flows could hit Jordan and Syria. Iran and Turkey could be tempted to make power grabs. Perhaps most important, the invasion has created a new stronghold from which terrorist activity could proliferate.

“The administration, the Democratic-controlled Congress, the United Nations and America's allies must try to mitigate these outcomes—and they may fail. But Americans must be equally honest about the fact that keeping troops in Iraq will only make things worse.”

Reprisals, further ethnic cleansing, even genocide—such are the potential consequences of a drawdown of US troops, the *Times* declares. Even the mechanics of a withdrawal of the present occupation force presents massive and possibly disastrous problems.

The editorial states: “The United States has about 160,000 troops and

millions of tons of military gear inside Iraq. Getting that force out safely will be a formidable challenge. The main road south to Kuwait is notoriously vulnerable to roadside bomb attacks. Soldiers, weapons and vehicles will need to be deployed to secure bases while airlift and sealift operations are organized. Withdrawal routes will have to be guarded. The exit must be everything the invasion was not: based on reality and backed by adequate resources.”

What is the newspaper saying here? What are the implications of establishing “secure bases,” carrying out “airlift and sealift operations,” guarding withdrawal routes and providing “adequate resources?” How much more Iraqi and American blood will be shed? Does the *Times* contemplate an even larger deployment of US troops to effect a “withdrawal?”

The editorial continues: “The United States should explore using Kurdish territory in the north of Iraq as a secure staging area. Being able to use bases and ports in Turkey would also make withdrawal faster and safer. Turkey has been an inconsistent ally in this war, but like other nations, it should realize that shouldering part of the burden of the aftermath is in its own interest.”

Why would the Turkish ruling elite, which considers the consolidation of a Kurdish stronghold in Iraq’s north a mortal threat to itself, consent to US “staging areas” in the region and even agree to facilitate such a development by making its own ports and bases available to the US military? The *Times* does not say.

As for the prospects for Iraqis of a US “withdrawal” as envisioned by the *Times*, the newspaper writes that the war has “created a new front where the United States will have to continue to battle terrorist forces and enlist local allies who reject the idea of an Iraq hijacked by international terrorists. The military will need resources and bases to stanch this self-inflicted wound for the foreseeable future.”

This can only mean a permanent US military presence and continual bomb and missile attacks against alleged “terrorists,” punctuated by US Special Forces raids on Iraqi towns and communities. This scenario is spelled out somewhat more concretely in a section entitled “The Question of Bases.” The editorial declares:

“The United States could strike an agreement with the Kurds to create those bases in northeastern Iraq. Or, the Pentagon could use its bases in countries like Kuwait and Qatar, and its large naval presence in the Persian Gulf, as staging points.

“There are arguments for, and against, both options. Leaving troops in Iraq might make it too easy—and too tempting—to get drawn back into the civil war and confirm suspicions that Washington’s real goal was to secure permanent bases in Iraq. Mounting attacks from other countries could endanger those nations’ governments.

“The White House should make this choice after consultation with Congress and the other countries in the region, whose opinions the Bush administration has essentially ignored. The bottom line: the Pentagon needs enough force to stage effective raids and airstrikes against terrorist forces in Iraq, but not enough to resume large-scale combat.”

Again, what does this really mean? How much force is “enough?” 50,000 troops? 100,000? 500,000? Will it require the restoration of the military draft?

How exponentially must the already massive US military presence in the region be increased to “stage effective raids and airstrikes against terrorist forces in Iraq?” How many, and which, governments in the region will be destabilized by a permanently expanded US military presence in the region? Jordan? Saudi Arabia? Kuwait? Egypt?

There follows a section entitled “The Civil War,” which states: “Iraq may fragment into separate Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite republics, and American troops are not going to stop that from happening.”

It continues: “Iraq’s leaders—knowing that they can no longer rely on the Americans to guarantee their survival—might be more open to

compromise, perhaps to a Bosnian-style partition, with economic resources fairly shared but with millions of Iraqis forced to relocate.”

It was not so long ago that “Bosnia” was a watchword of the US political and media establishment for war crimes and genocide. Indeed, the charge of genocide leveled against the Serbs—a deliberate exaggeration of the crimes of Serb militia against Bosnian Muslims—played a central role in the preparing public opinion for the eventual air war against Serbia in 1999. Now the *Times* calmly proposes such a solution for Iraq—euphemistically using the term “relocation” to denote the brutal ethnic cleansing and sectarian warfare that would inevitably result in a country where Sunnis and Shia still live side by side in many regions.

Next, the *Times* raises the specter of massive refugee flows further destabilizing the entire Middle East, spreading “Iraq’s conflict far beyond its borders.” It declares that all six countries bordering Iraq—Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria—along with other nations must cooperate in containing the refugee crisis. They, along with the nations of Europe and Asia, must, the newspaper asserts, join with the US in contributing cash to defray the costs of such a project.

The new governments in Britain, France and Germany, the *Times* writes, must do their part to deal with the crisis because “to put it baldly, terrorism and oil make it impossible to ignore.”

“One of the trickiest tasks,” the editorial continues, “will be avoiding excessive meddling in Iraq by its neighbors—America’s friends as well as its adversaries.

“Just as Iran should come under international pressure to allow Shiites in southern Iraq to develop their own independent future, Washington must help persuade Sunni powers like Syria not to intervene on behalf of Sunni Iraqis. Turkey must be kept from sending troops into Kurdish territories.”

Exactly how the US will impose its will on these countries, under conditions in which a fractured Iraq has brought long-standing tensions and rivalries in the region to the boiling point, the *Times* does not say. By diplomatic blackmail? By military force?

At one point, the editorial declares, “The administration should use whatever leverage it gains from withdrawing to press its allies and Iraq’s neighbors to help achieve a negotiated solution.” This underscores one of the most glaring of the contradictions that abound in the editorial.

What international leverage will the United States gain from tacitly admitting defeat and pulling out the bulk of its combat forces from Iraq? Why should other countries, allies and adversaries alike, be more inclined to tow Washington’s line after it has suffered a military and political humiliation?

There is, however, an even more fundamental contradiction. In its opening passages, the editorial announces that the *Times* has dropped its previous opposition to setting a withdrawal date because, “It is frighteningly clear that Mr. Bush’s plan is to stay the course as long as he is president and dump the mess on his successor.”

Thus the premise for the policy shift outlined by the *Times* is the unwillingness and inability of Bush and Cheney to change course and avert a full-scale catastrophe. Yet the statement repeatedly appeals to the White House to do precisely that.

It states, for example, “Congress and the White House must lead an international attempt at a negotiated outcome. To start, Washington must turn to the United Nations, which Mr. Bush spurned and ridiculed as a preface to war.”

The *New York Times*, considered the most authoritative organ of the US ruling elite, outlines a crisis of historic proportions and describes a level of irresponsibility, incompetence and criminality in the White House that has no precedent. A serious response, from the standpoint of the interests of American imperialism, would begin with the demand that the current government resign, or that Congress initiate immediate impeachment proceedings against both Cheney and Bush. That would be the

prerequisite for the “candid and focused” conversation on the war which the newspaper claims to desire.

But the *Times* proposes nothing of the kind. In fact, it proposes no measures to hold any of those responsible for dragging the country into an “unnecessary” war accountable. This, above all, is what gives its entire pronouncement an aura of unreality.

There are many reasons for this glaring silence. In the first place, the entire political establishment, including its liberal wing, is implicated in the Iraq disaster. The *Times* itself supported the invasion, with whatever tactical quibbles, and played a critical role in promulgating the lies about weapons of mass destruction that were used to justify the invasion. To this day, it has concealed from the American people the scale of the death and destruction the US was wreaked on the Iraqi people.

Beyond that, there is the organic cowardice of the liberal, Democratic Party establishment, and its fear of the political consequences within the US of an attempt to dislodge the current administration. These sections of the ruling elite sense that an open attack on Bush and Cheney could unleash pent-up social anger and popular forces that could spiral out of the control of the entire political establishment.

An international disaster for US imperialism of such magnitude as that which the *Times* describes cannot but have the most far-reaching economic and political consequences within the US itself. This side of the matter is not even broached by the newspaper.

But the US debacle in Iraq will have profound ramifications for which American working people must prepare. The crisis of American imperialism in Iraq cannot be left as a matter for debate within the ruling elite. Those responsible for an illegal and unprovoked war that has already cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives and killed or maimed tens of thousands of Americans cannot be allowed to prepare further atrocities in Iraq and new wars of aggression. The decisive question is the independent political intervention of the working class in opposition to imperialist war and the capitalist ruling elite in whose interests it is waged.



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