

Former US Marine Matt Howard speaks with WSWS

“No-one is talking about the real violence”

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10 September 2007

Former US Marine Matt Howard, a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War, toured Australia last week, speaking at a number of antiwar meetings as well as demonstrations in Sydney held during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. Howard, 26, was a 7-tonne driver in the Marine Corps' 1st Tank Battalion during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He served a second tour of duty in 2004.

Before speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*, he addressed last Saturday's protest in Sydney.

“George Bush, my commander in chief, arrives this week from the Green Zone in Iraq to the Green Zone in Sydney for APEC,” he told the demonstrators. “He comes with an entourage of over 800 personnel, this city has been shut down, barricades have been thrown up everywhere.

“Everywhere Bush travels he has to erect a fortress to protect himself. What the hell is this man so afraid of? I'll tell you what he's afraid of—he's afraid of the people. He's afraid of the 75 percent of Americans who disapprove of his leadership and the 90 percent of the world that disagrees with his brutal foreign policy. He's afraid that the people also know that there would never be boots on the ground in Iraq if there wasn't oil under the ground in Iraq. He knows that we ultimately have the power to stop the war...

“So here we are once again, a new generation fighting the same old war. Once again the guys on the ground, the ones that have seen the atrocities, the ones that are being told to kill, veterans and active duty service members—we're done. We're done being told with the threat of court martial to run over children that get in the way of our speeding convoys. We're done abusing and torturing prisoners. We're done raiding and destroying the homes of innocent Iraqi people on a nightly basis. We're done being hired thugs for the 160,000 contractors representing US corporate interests. We're done being exposed to depleted uranium, the Agent Orange of this war. We're done coming home broken from one, two, three, four tours of duty, only to find out that the commander-in-chief, George Bush, has actually cut funding to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, that he told our doctors to diagnose us with pre-existing personality disorders, instead of post-traumatic stress. We're done killing for lies...

“Since I've been here all I've heard from the media is the supposed threat of violence from the protestors, but nobody is talking about the issues behind these protests. No-one is talking about the real violence, the real violence that only those of us that have been in Iraq can truly understand. It's the slaughter of 600,000 Iraqis, it's the complete disregard for human life that us soldiers are conditioned to have when we're in Iraq. When we invaded in 2003 we killed men, we killed women, and, yes, we killed children. I saw buses filled with women and children blown wide open by tank rounds, I saw our command legalise murder when we changed the rules of engagement—the same thing they did in Vietnam but then they called it free fire zones. If it moves it dies, and it did. We were never there to help those people. I was ordered to bury the humanitarian food I was given because we were told, ‘We're the United States Marine Corps we are not the United States Peace Corps, we have one mission and that is to fight’. And that's what we did.

“Four and a half years later this man's lies are known throughout the world and yet he continues to act with impunity... George Bush, you have violated international law and are a war criminal by all Nuremberg legal standards. Your surge has failed and you won't fool us with this little numbers game you're trying to play. I don't care if attacks have gone down by 80 percent, it doesn't matter. Your benchmarks are a farce. The only real target in Iraq is for all foreign troops to leave.”

WSWS: Can you tell us about your experiences during the 2003 invasion?

Matt Howard: The push to Baghdad set the tone for the next four years of brutal occupation. There was a complete disregard for human life that I witnessed, almost a bloodlust. Stuff I saw personally really made me question our motives. At a certain point we changed the rules of engagement, for example, going ‘weapons free’ which is the same thing in Vietnam as free fire zone, meaning you can fire on anyone regardless of whether they're clearly identified as an enemy combatant. Obviously with this they'd have to be wearing a uniform or carrying a weapon. So that was in the initial invasion, and today when you look at how the United States military operates in Iraq, there is no such thing as a non-combatant. I've never heard talk about a civilian in Iraq—they're either a racial slur or a terrorist or an insurgent or a potential terrorist or insurgent threat. The reality of the situation is that we are not at war against the country of Iraq, we are at war against the people of Iraq.

WSWS: What was the impact within the rank and file when no weapons of mass destruction were found?

MH: We were questioning things way before then, you know, the guys on the ground know what's up. There I was going to Baghdad and we're being told about WMDs, we're wearing full-on chemical suits because supposedly it was a very real threat. Then we got outside of Baghdad and here we are, about to enter the lion's den where the fierce Republican Guard is waiting with supposed anthrax and VX and god knows what else and the intelligence command said 'OK, everyone can now take off their chemical suits'. Don't get me wrong, these things are incredibly uncomfortable, we were glad to have them off, but we're like, wait a minute we're about to enter Baghdad, the epicentre of this supposed weapons of mass destruction threat, and we're being told to take off our chemical suits?

So of course they knew there was no threat, they knew it from the beginning. The fact of the matter was that it was getting hot, and they were having heat casualties with these suits being donned on top of all their gear, so they just said take them off. So you know, we saw through those lies from the very beginning.

We got to Kuwait in January 2003, before the invasion. We were being told, the world was being told, we might not go, this is going to be the option of last resort. Meanwhile bombers are screaming over our heads, softening up Iraq. Meanwhile there are thousands of contractors already there before us waiting for us, waiting for our arrival, all these KBR guys, Halliburton guys. So yeah, we saw through it from the very beginning.

WSWS: You still know many people who are still serving in Iraq. How is morale?

MH: Morale has never been so low in the military, and this is even coming from the top echelons of the military leadership. The military is on the verge of being broken. In Vietnam you did one tour of duty for one year, now we're looking at guys, two, three, four, five tours of duty with no end in sight. Guys are being sent to do 15 months in Iraq. Even from a tactical, strategic, military standpoint they cannot keep this tempo going and soldiers are just being exhausted, mentally and physically. Post-traumatic stress is a very real consequence of war and right now we're just seeing soldiers being broken.

WSWS: There is now a discussion in US ruling circles about re-introducing the draft.

MH: This speaks to how desperate they really are. They can't get the numbers for this failed occupation so they're going to do everything they can to try to get those bodies, to try to get that cannon fodder. The numbers speak for themselves and that's why they're talking about implementing such policies.

WSWS: With soldiers now overwhelmingly drawn from working class and poor rural backgrounds, the present situation has been described as economic conscription. Why did you join the military?

MH: Well, I'm not going to be a poster boy for economic conscription, I was middle class. I was looking for an education. But at the same time, yeah, you look at everything that is lacking in our society and that is what's being used as recruitment tools—education, healthcare, things like this.

You know, I look back on it, and see there could have been other ways to go about funding my education. It speaks to our lack of knowledge. I went in before 9/11 kind of knowing that the United States government has seen pretty atrocious mistakes, I knew about Vietnam. But there was kind of a sense that Vietnam would never be repeated, that as a country we'd recognised that that was a mistake. I never knew that it would be repeated. I never knew that it actually never stopped, that history went on. We were never taught in high school about what happened, for example, in Central America through

the 1980s. American imperialism has never stopped. Unfortunately I found out about that after it was too late.

WSWS: How did you get involved in the antiwar GI movement?

MH: I got involved when I got out [of the army]. I had tried to forget about the whole military experience as most veterans do, but unfortunately the reality is that try as you may you really can't forget this stuff, and the more you put it out of your mind the more it becomes the central theme to your life. And I finally woke up to the fact that it's not only the right thing to do, but I have a responsibility to speak as a veteran, as somebody who has been there. I need to lend my credibility to the movement and speak openly and honestly about what I have seen.

WSWS: Since winning last November's congressional elections the Democrats have continued to fund and support the occupation of Iraq.

MH: The Democrats have absolutely betrayed us. We voted them into power on an antiwar mandate and they have refused to confront Bush and to listen to the constituency that put them into power. They have given Bush all the funding he's asked for. They've wasted our time with these non-binding resolutions. They actually seem to be making this sick political calculation that if they just let Bush hang himself for another year that will just shore up their victory even more come next election. This is disgusting, you know, we're talking about the lives of American and Iraqi people on the line here.

We need to really read through the subtext of all the plans for withdrawal that the Democrats are talking about because none of them are talking about full, immediate withdrawal. It's all window dressing on a continued occupation. All the plans carry in them stipulations, to keep the permanent bases that we've built and are continuing to build in Iraq, to keep the world's largest embassy that's bigger than the Vatican City in Iraq, to keep thousands of special operations troops in Iraq. So we need to be very wary of what's coming out of the Democratic Party.

WSWS: Cindy Sheehan has recently quit the Democrats and announced she will run against Nancy Pelosi, the Democrat speaker of the House of Representatives. What do you think about Sheehan's political evolution?

MH: Her evolution is great. She copped so much flak because she awoke to the fact that the Democrats have betrayed us, and the second that she started voicing this to the Democrats all of a sudden she's ostracised by the very community that had formerly embraced her. Which is disgusting. But she's awoken to the truth. I think it's great, I think it's going to take more average Americans to call the Democrats out and to call them out on the fact that ultimately they all share the same material objectives; they're just going about it in different ways. So I think she's got the support of the people. I think she's going to do great.



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