

Bush presses campaign for open-ended war in Iraq

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Bush's Labor Day visit to Iraq marks the beginning of a month-long White House drive to win congressional authorization and funding to continue the war in Iraq for the duration of Bush's term in office, which ends January 2009, and beyond. It came only two days after administration officials revealed they would request an additional \$50 billion in funding for the war, on top of the \$100 billion appropriated by the Democratic-controlled Congress in May.

The six-hour visit—a stopover on Bush's trip to Australia for an economic summit of the Asia-Pacific region—was a publicity stunt aimed at presenting an image of progress in the US military occupation and generating favorable coverage in the servile US commercial media. It comes at the start of a month of reports, hearings and congressional votes on war appropriations.

To press its claims of “success” in the military surge begun last February, the White House brought Bush to Al Asad Air Base in Anbar Province, the western region of Iraq which was the scene of the bloodiest clashes with Iraqi insurgents during the first four years of the US occupation.

As the result of agreements reached with Sunni tribal leaders since last fall—greased by substantial bribes in the form of cash and weapons—the US military has declared the occupation in Anbar Province to be on much firmer ground. US officials claim that the Sunni sheiks, who once supported the insurgency against the US occupation regime, have switched sides, and they cite instances of open warfare between tribal factions and fighters still opposed to the occupation, including those loyal to Al Qaeda in Iraq.

The White House pointed to Bush's ability to visit Anbar—his first trip to any location in Iraq outside Baghdad—as proof of positive military and political trends in the province. But Bush kept far away from ordinary Iraqis in Fallujah or Ramadi. He traveled in complete secrecy to a huge US base, 17 miles in circumference, manned by 10,000 troops, located in relative isolation from Iraqi population centers, near the point where the Euphrates River crosses the Syria-Iraq border.

Al Asad is one of the four huge bases—more like transplanted American cities—which the Pentagon has built as garrison points for the indefinite stationing of American troops and warplanes. These four bases would play a critical role in any

future US war in the region, particularly against Iran or Syria.

Bush was accompanied by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Peter Pace, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, and the newly appointed White House Iraq coordinator, Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute. They conferred at the base with the US military commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker.

While press accounts claimed that the purpose of these consultations was to discuss the testimony Petraeus and Crocker are giving to Congress September 10 and 11, it is far more likely that the meeting, bringing all the top US decision-makers except Vice President Cheney, had a more sinister purpose—to review US military options against Iran, and the likely consequences within Iraq of a major US air assault on Iran.

Bush made two speeches threatening Iran last month, and there have been numerous reports of stepped-up US military planning for a massive air offensive against alleged Iranian nuclear facilities and training centers run by Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

The *Times of London* reported Sunday, “The Pentagon has drawn up plans for massive air strikes against 1,200 targets in Iran, designed to annihilate the Iranians' military capability in three days, according to a national security expert.”

The account cited discussions at a meeting organized by the *National Interest*, a right-wing foreign policy journal. One participant, Alexis Debat, director of terrorism and national security studies at the Nixon Center, told the *Times* that US military planners were not preparing for “pinprick strikes” against Iran's nuclear facilities. “They're about taking out the entire Iranian military,” he said.

While giving lip service to withdrawal as a goal, in a brief address to 700 troops stationed at the base, Bush declared that any US pullout from Iraq would be “from a position of strength and success, not from a position of fear and failure.” The actual time frame of the US occupation is in years, if not decades. According to a congresswoman who visited Iraq last week, General Petraeus said, in the course of his briefing to the delegation, that the US “will be in Iraq in some way for nine to ten years.”

Bush also ate a meal with the troops and made remarks to the media hailing the conditions in Anbar province. “The level of violence is down, local governments are meeting again, police are in control of the city streets and normal life is returning,” he said, although this account bears no resemblance to the reality of life for ordinary Iraqis in Anbar or any other region of the country.

Just hours before the president’s arrival, relief agencies reported an outbreak of cholera, the largest in 30 years, in the Kurdish-populated northern region which has long been touted as the “success story” of Iraq. This is one expression of the destruction of Iraq’s social infrastructure as the result of 17 years of war, sanctions, a second war and occupation.

Those Iraqis who did meet with Bush during his brief stay included Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—who was as heavily guarded as Bush, given the widespread hostility among Sunnis to the Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad—and a group of Sunni sheiks. Only hours before the visit, the administration approved another huge bribe to the Sunni local leaders, over the objections of Maliki, who wants all US aid routed through Baghdad.

Both the agreement and the visit thus carried an implicit warning to Maliki, who has rebuffed US pressure for concessions to the Sunnis and greater distance from Iran, declaring that he could find other friends than the United States in the region. Washington was telling the Iraqi prime minister that it too can find “other friends,” like the Sunni sheiks, and arm and finance them as a counterweight to the government in Baghdad.

Besides reviewing military options and bringing additional pressure on Maliki, a major purpose of the visit was to continue the administration’s campaign of intimidation and fear-mongering against antiwar sentiment at home. The White House has taken the measure of the congressional Democrats, who appealed to antiwar sentiment in the 2006 elections but have refused to take any action to force an end to the war, fundamentally because they support the goal of US imperialist domination of the Middle East.

The Democratic leaders in the House and Senate had claimed that they would push aggressively for an end to the war in Iraq when Congress ended its August recess and resumed work on the defense appropriations bills and on yet another emergency funding request for war. But instead, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid signaled last week that the Democrats’ token opposition to the war would become even more toothless and two-faced when Congress resumes on September 4.

The *Washington Post* reported, in a front-page story in its Friday edition, that Reid “said he is now willing to compromise with Republicans to find ways to limit troop deployments in Iraq.”

Reid blocked action on previous amendments to the defense budget bill that stopped short of setting a deadline for the withdrawal of US combat troops. Reid is now saying he is

prepared to take action on measures that would require an initial withdrawal of troops without specifying an end-date. “I don’t think we have to think that our way is the only way,” he told the *Post*.

Other measures could include legislation to require troops to have more time at home between deployments, as well as to adopt the recommendations of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group as official US policy. The Iraq Study Group opposed any set timeline for a US pullout from Iraq.

Two other leading Senate Democrats made similar comments to *Congressional Quarterly* magazine. Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he would seek a vote on a measure he introduced in the spring, calling for withdrawal of some troops within 120 days, but removing a deadline of April 30, 2008 for pulling out all combat troops. “If we can pick up some more Republican support, it’s certainly worthy of consideration,” Levin said.

Ken Salazar, a Democrat from Colorado, said he would seek a vote on his resolution to adopt the Iraq Study Group proposals, but adding a provision that some US troops be pulled out of Iraq before the end of this year.

All of these measures would permit the stationing of US troops in Iraq indefinitely and in large numbers, as long as their function was not defined as “combat”—i.e., for “training” Iraqi forces or to protect installations such as US military bases and Iraq’s huge oilfields.

The entire process that will unfold this month in hearings and congressional debates and votes is an exercise in mass deception, aimed at convincing the American people that the Democrats are trying their hardest to end the war, but unable to overcome the resistance of the Bush administration and the legislative obstacles (filibusters, etc.) put in place by the congressional Republicans.

The truth is far different. The Democratic-controlled Congress has had the power, since it took office in January, to end the war by cutting off funding. But at every critical point, the Democratic leadership has bowed to the White House and approved the tens of billions required to continue the bloodbath. The Democrats play a two-faced role: appealing to antiwar sentiment, in order to preserve the fiction that the official two-party system will respond to mass pressure, while ensuring that the war goes on to defend the interests of American imperialism.



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