

US Congressional hearings to set stage for continued war in Iraq

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A bogus official debate is set to erupt in Washington today as the top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, deliver their long-awaited report to Congress on the Bush administration's "surge" of troops to reinforce the US occupation.

Nearly a year ago, the American people delivered their verdict on the war in Iraq in the mid-term elections by voting against Republicans and delivering a majority to the Democrats in both the House and the Senate. Far from opposing the occupation and insisting on the withdrawal of troops, however, the Democrats quickly abandoned their antiwar posturing and voted to fund a major increase in troop levels in Iraq.

The temporary "surge" is rapidly becoming permanent. Last week, Major General Richard Sherlock, director of operational planning for the Joint Staff, announced that US troop levels had reached an all-time high of 168,000 and will reach a new peak of 172,000 in coming months, before falling to around 160,000 by November or December, due to troop rotations.

General Petraeus has indicated in advance of today's hearings that he will be recommending only token troop withdrawals before next spring. President Bush has repeatedly declared that his administration will back the generals in Iraq. "I'm not interested in artificial timetables, or dates of withdrawal. I'm interested in achieving an objective," he declared last week in Sydney. As far as the Democrats are concerned, one thing is certain: in the coming days and weeks, no serious challenge will be mounted to the White House strategy.

Not only have troop numbers been bolstered by at least 30,000, but more of the new soldiers are earmarked for combat. The "surge" added five combat

brigades to the 15 already in place—that is, a 33.3 percent increase in combat troops. Many have been placed in vulnerable forward posts that are part of Petraeus's counter-insurgency strategy, or flung into major new offensive operations. As of Saturday, US casualties since the 2003 invasion stood at 3,760 dead and more than 26,000 wounded.

The broad consensus in official US circles is in marked contrast to the sentiments of most Americans. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll released yesterday found that 58 percent favoured decreasing the number of US troops in Iraq, with nearly all these respondents saying the withdrawal should begin this year. Only 28 percent believe the "surge" has improved the situation in Iraq. Some 65 percent disapprove of Bush's policy in Iraq and 66 percent believe that the president will stick to his war policy regardless of the content of today's reports.

A BBC World Service poll of 23,000 people in 22 countries published last Friday found that the overwhelming majority opposed the Iraq war and supported a pull out of all US-led forces. Across all countries, 39 percent backed an immediate withdrawal and another 28 percent felt that all troops should be out within a year. By contrast only 23 percent supported the indefinite presence of foreign troops in Iraq. In Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Brazil and Mexico, a clear majority backed immediate withdrawal. While fewer respondents in the US supported an immediate pull-out, 61 percent thought all troops should be out of Iraq within a year or less.

Although conducted sporadically, all polling of Iraqis has found that the vast majority wants foreign troops out of their country and blames the occupation for the day-to-day disaster they confront. The very manner in which the indices and benchmarks of the "surge" are

discussed in Washington makes a mockery of Bush's claims to be bringing "democracy" to Iraq. The strategy was drawn up by the Pentagon and the White House and imposed on a compliant puppet regime in Baghdad in order to shore up a neo-colonial occupation.

Petraeus and other US generals have been talking up the improved "security" situation in Iraq, but their carefully selected figures are designed to obscure the reality confronting Iraqis. The latest civilian casualty figures compiled by the Associated Press for August counted 1,809 deaths as compared to 1,760 for July. Statistics passed to the *New York Times* by an Iraqi Interior Ministry official were even higher—2,318 civilian deaths in August against 1,980 in July.

As a detailed report in yesterday's *New York Times* established, the "success" of Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy in Baghdad has been to carve up what was a thriving cosmopolitan city into Sunni and Shiite ghettos, walled off from each other by high concrete barriers. A drop in civilian deaths in the capital is mainly because whole suburbs have been *takhalasu* or purged along sectarian lines, with more than 35,000 people fleeing since the US troop build up earlier this year. Life for most Iraqis is a terrible nightmare, plagued by high levels of unemployment and poverty, the lack of basic services and constant fear for their lives.

In his report today, Petraeus will undoubtedly highlight his success in dividing the anti-US insurgency by enlisting Sunni tribes in Anbar and other provinces to fight "Al Qaeda"—a catch-all for Sunni fighters intransigently opposed to the US occupation. Like the partitioning of Baghdad, this new tactic of arming, funding and training Sunni tribesman is only setting the stage for an intensification of the sectarian war that the Bush administration's policies have triggered and fuelled.

Not surprisingly, as he attempts to put an optimistic gloss on the US occupation, Ambassador Crocker has pressed the UN to delay its regular quarterly report on human rights in Iraq. According to UN sources, its report, which is already complete, not only highlights sectarian violence, but abuses by US and Iraqi forces over the past three months of the "surge". Since January, the number of Iraqis detained without trial in US and Iraqi jails has jumped from around 15,000 to

more than 24,000.

The debate in Washington over the "surge" and the reports of Petraeus and Crocker will be limited to tactical differences over how best to defend US strategic and economic interests, not only in Iraq but throughout the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia. Far from preparing for withdrawal, the build-up of American troops in Iraq has been accompanied by a consolidation of huge US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, an augmentation of US naval and airpower, and the strengthening of regional military alliances—in preparation for a new military adventure against neighbouring Iran.



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