

Gen. Petraeus testifies before Congress

Democrats arrest protesters, praise US commander in Iraq

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On the first of two days of congressional hearings on the Iraq war, Democratic congressmen lavished praise on Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, while professing their commitment to “success” in the colonial occupation of the devastated country and support for the imperialist aims that underlay the 2003 invasion.

Gen. Petraeus and Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Iraq, testified Monday before a joint session of the Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives. They are to testify Tuesday at separate sessions of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees.

The testimony of Petraeus, mandated in the bill passed last May by the Democratic-controlled Congress granting the Bush administration’s request for some \$200 billion in additional funds for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been hyped by the administration and the media as the authoritative word on the progress of the military “surge” launched by Bush last February. It is to be followed later this week by a nationally televised address by Bush on the Iraq war.

Petraeus had already let it be known that he would declare the surge a military success and propose a token reduction in US troop levels—soon to reach 172,000—in December, followed by a gradual decline by the summer of 2008 to the pre-surge level of 130,000. He had also made it clear that he fully supported the Bush administration’s opposition to any significant reduction below that level and foresaw a large US military presence for years to come.

The tone for Monday’s hearing was set by Rep. Ike Skelton, the Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who announced at the outset that there would be “no disturbances” and that spectators who sought to demonstrate their opposition to the war would be “immediately escorted out.”

“Out they go!” he said. “No disturbances will be tolerated, and we mean that.”

Among those in the audience were members of the “Code Pink” protest group and other antiwar activists. As soon as they spoke up, Skelton ordered that they be removed by the Capitol police. He included in his ban “those who are displaying a sign.”

After four people had been dragged out of the chamber, including the nationally known antiwar campaigner Cindy Sheehan, Skelton announced that they would be prosecuted.

None of the dozens of congressmen and congresswomen on the platform raised any objection to the quashing of free speech. The scene gave a stark picture of the chasm separating the entire political establishment and the broad mass of the American people, who by a wide majority oppose the war, and who sought to express that opposition by voting the Democrats into power in the congressional elections ten months ago.

In their opening remarks, Skelton and the Democratic chairman of the

Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Lantos, left no doubt that Democratic congressional criticism of the administration’s Iraq policy has nothing in common with a principled opposition to an illegal and murderous war of aggression, launched on the basis of lies.

Following the obligatory praise for the “valiant and heroic” efforts of the US troops and testimonials to the integrity of Petraeus and Crocker, Skelton questioned the open-ended commitment of large numbers of troops in Iraq because it meant troops were not available to “go into Afghanistan and get bin Laden” six years after 9/11, and there were “not enough troops to go after other threats.”

“We need troops prepared for a full spectrum of combat,” he added. To emphasize his militaristic point, he continued, “Some called for more troops immediately after the invasion. Gen. Petraeus is the right man for the job, three years too late and 200,000 troops short.”

He then indulged in what has become a staple of Democratic criticism of Bush’s war policy, shifting the blame for the catastrophe inflicted on Iraq by the US onto the Iraqis themselves. “The Iraqis have not stepped up to the challenge,” he declared.

Lantos began by declaring, “Every single one of us wants you to succeed in your efforts to the maximum possible.”

Later, in the course of questioning Petraeus, Lantos suggested that there was an intermediate course between the administration’s policy and a “precipitous” withdrawal, i.e., “a more rapid, but responsible withdrawal of American forces.” He then echoed the warnings made by Skelton, saying “global security requirements were not being taken into account, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.”

Petraeus’s testimony fleshed out the meaning of the references by Skelton and Lantos to “other threats” that might require a military response. He made several pointed allusions to alleged Iranian “interference” in Iraq, noting that his forces had captured “leaders of Iranian-supported groups and Hezbollah agents.” He added, “It is increasingly apparent to both coalition and Iraqi leaders that Iran, through the use of the Quds force, seeks to turn the Iraqi special groups into a Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq.”

The gathering threat of a US military attack on Iran was the subtext of the hearing. It was underscored by a report Monday in the *Wall Street Journal* that the US is planning to build its first military base near Iraq’s border with Iran, slated to be operative by November of this year, as well as fortified checkpoints on major roads leading to Baghdad from Iran.

Crocker, in his testimony, said the administration would “seek additional ways to reduce regional interference”—a thinly veiled reference to Iran and Syria.

There is little doubt that accelerated planning for a military attack on Iran is a major factor in Petraeus’s plan to withdraw one Army

brigade—about 4,000 troops—from Iraq in December of this year, and allow the troop level to drop to the pre-surge level by next August. Another is the simple fact that the current troop strength in Iraq is unsustainable without a further lengthening of tours of duty beyond 15 months—something the military brass believes is not feasible.

Crocker, for his part, blandly downplayed the importance of the 18 benchmarks which the Bush administration had set for the Iraqi government to meet, saying there was no prospect that they would be met any time soon.

He justified the failure of the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to meet the benchmarks with the claim that the deposed Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein had “deconstructed” Iraqi society. This was uttered by the representative of a US government that has devastated Iraqi society, fueled a sectarian civil war, killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, and visited upon the population such horrors as Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Fallujah and the mass imprisonment of those suspected of resisting foreign occupation.

In a particularly grotesque use of the “Big Lie” technique, he replied to a question from a Republican congressman about the possible consequences of a US withdrawal from Iraq by citing his experience as a State Department official in Beirut in the early 1980s. He personally witnessed, he said, the mass murder of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982, warning that something similar would occur in Iraq.

He neglected to mention that the massacre was orchestrated by the Israeli military, which had invaded Lebanon, surrounded the camps and, with the knowledge and approval of the US, invited the Lebanese fascist Phalange to enter the camps and “clean them out.”

As Monday’s hearing underscored, the entire framework of the official debate on Iraq is determined by the imperialist aims of the American ruling elite and excludes a genuine debate on the war. The parameters are the best tactics for resolving the US crisis in Iraq in the interests of the American corporate oligarchy, at the expense of the people of both Iraq and the United States. Its inevitable trajectory is an intensification of US military violence in Iraq and an expansion of the war beyond Iraq’s borders.

Even within this framework, however, Petraeus’s picture of the “success” of the surge and the situation in Iraq is a gross falsification of reality. The general has claimed that sectarian killings have declined by as much as 75 percent in recent weeks.

But a series of independent reports contradict this rosy scenario. According to national police reports compiled by the Associated Press, for example, war-related Iraqi civilian deaths rose in August. The AP estimated that at least 1,809 civilians were killed last month. In July the figure stood at 1,760.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Organization reported in August that the number of internally displaced Iraqis has more than doubled, from 499,000 to 1.1 million, since the surge began in February. According to the Red Crescent, 100,000 people a month have been fleeing their homes since the US surge began.

The US military’s Task Force 124, which runs US detention operations in Iraq, reports that since February the number of prisoners held by the US and other foreign military forces has risen by 50 percent, from 16,000 in February to 24,500 now.

As for the impact of the surge in Baghdad, the *Independent* newspaper reported Monday: “A city divided by high concrete walls, barbed wire and checkpoints: armoured columns moving through deserted evening streets lit by the glow of searchlights and emptied by official curfew and fear. This is Baghdad, seven months into the surge...”

The surge has meant a further brutalization and terrorizing of the Iraqi people, and virtual transformation of the country into one large concentration camp. Little wonder that a new poll by ABC News, the

BBC and the Japanese broadcast NHK finds that barely a quarter of Iraqis say their security has improved in the past six months, over 65 percent say the surge has worsened security, political stability and reconstruction, and 79 percent say they oppose the presence of US forces.

A raft of new polls taken in the US show a parallel hardening and broadening of opposition both to the war and to the Bush administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress.

A *New York Times*/CBS News poll reported that 78 percent of Americans favor either a large or total withdrawal of US troops, and 64 percent favor establishing a timetable for a 2008 withdrawal. Bush’s approval rating is at 30 percent and six in ten say the administration deliberately misled the public in making the case for the war. Even more significantly, the approval rating for the Democratic Congress stands at 23 percent, a new low.

An ABC/*Washington Post* poll released Sunday had 58 percent saying the surge had no impact on the situation in Iraq, while 12 felt it had made the situation worse.

And a *USA Today*/Gallup poll published Monday reported that a “record 60 percent say the US should set a timetable to withdraw forces and ‘stick to that timetable regardless of what is going on in Iraq.’”

Not only is Bush a hated figure, there is a growing disillusionment and disgust with the Democratic Party for its complicity in continuing the war.

The response of the Democratic Party is to move even closer to the Bush administration’s position on Iraq. The Democrats have abandoned any attempt to legislate a deadline even for a partial withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

As the *New York Times*’s David Sanger noted in a commentary Monday, “[T]he Democrats are backing away from the plans they made in early summer to push again for a hard deadline for troop withdrawal after General Petraeus’s testimony.” The debate now focused, he continued, on “...what would constitute a ‘sustainable’ presence in a country that even most of the Democratic presidential candidates acknowledge will require a major American presence for years to come.”

In terms of substance, as opposed to rhetoric, there is barely a discernible difference between the proposals of the Democratic congressional leadership and the plans of the administration. Democratic Senator Carl Levin, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, for example, is proposing a measure that would merely require the administration to act on the request of the ranking Republican on the committee, Senator John Warner, for a token withdrawal of 4,000 or so troops before the end of the year. This is, in fact, what Petraeus is proposing.

The chasm separating the political establishment and vast sections of the population is a formula for a massive eruption of social and political struggle against the two-party political system, which ignores and excludes the sentiments and needs of the working population. The response of the ruling elite and its political parties will be a further intensification of attacks on democratic rights.

This was indicated ominously by a passing remark in Petraeus’s opening remarks at Monday’s hearing, when he called for “measures to stop the spread of enemy propaganda in cyberspace.” More fundamentally, the elevation of the military itself, in the figure of Petraeus, as the arbiter of policy on the life-and-death question of war testifies to the far-going decay of democratic processes in the US.

The abandonment of the constitutional principle of the subordination of military to civilian authority was summed in a column published in Monday’s *Wall Street Journal* under the joint byline of Republican Senator John McCain and Independent Democrat (and 2000 Democratic vice presidential candidate) Joe Lieberman. Entitled “Listening to Petraeus,” the column declared, “[T]he US footprint [in Iraq] will no doubt adjust. But these adjustments should be left to the discretion of Gen. Petraeus, not forced on our troops by politicians in Washington.”



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