

American liberalism and the Iraq War: The New York Times gives its blessing to Bush “surge”

Patrick Martin
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A front-page report in Tuesday's *New York Times* gave the newspaper's stamp of approval to the Bush administration's policy in Iraq. The report, spread across four columns under the headline, "Baghdad's Weary Start to Exhale as Security Improves," described improving conditions of life and security in the war-torn Dora neighborhood in southern Baghdad, portraying it as the outcome of the massive US military buildup in the Iraqi capital.

The *Times* report consists of a single anecdotal account—the story of one Shiite family who fled sectarian violence in Dora and has now returned—buttressed by figures supplied by the US military and the Iraqi regime, showing a decline in violent attacks from the highs recorded in the early part of this year.

"The security improvements in most neighborhoods are real," the article asserts. "Iraqis sound uncertain about the future, but defiantly optimistic. Many Baghdad residents seem to be willing themselves to normalcy, ignoring risks and suppressing fears to reclaim their lives."

The family interviewed "said they felt emboldened by the decline in violence citywide and the visible presence of Iraqi soldiers at a checkpoint a few blocks away," the article continues, although, significantly, no quotes are offered to substantiate this supposed sentiment.

After laying it on thick in this fashion, the *Times* is compelled to admit that the Shiite family profiled is more the exception than the rule. It describes the condition of a second Shiite family, the Nidhals, who fled violence in the west Baghdad neighborhood of Ghazaliya and have not returned because a Sunni family now occupies their home.

"In Baghdad there are far more families like the Nidhals," the newspaper concedes, citing official figures: "About 20,000 Iraqis have gone back to their Baghdad

homes, a fraction of the more than 4 million who fled nationwide, and the 1.4 million people in Baghdad who are still internally displaced, according to a recent Iraqi Red Crescent Society survey."

Why then the rose-colored portrayal of conditions in the Iraqi capital, prominently displayed in the most important American newspaper? Clearly what is involved here is a political adaptation by the *Times*, the most influential voice of official liberalism, to the Bush administration's policies in Iraq.

The political consequences were immediate, as the *Times* report became the basis of countless further comments, cascading through the American media, about "things looking up in Iraq." The right-wing press, of course, gloated that the success of the military surge in Iraq was evident "even to the *New York Times*," supposedly the most implacable critic of the war.

The foreign policy columnist for the *Times*, Thomas Friedman, a leading cheerleader for the initial US invasion who has more recently been silent on the subject, wrote the following day: "Right now what is indisputable is that we are seeing the first crack in years in a wall of pessimism that has been the Iraq story. It is only a crack, but it creates new possibilities."

The upbeat mood in the corporate-controlled media reached the point that ABC News anchorman Charles Gibson, in a sycophantic interview with George and Laura Bush at Camp David, broadcast Tuesday night, asked Bush whether he now felt inclined to "say I told you so" about the progress in Iraq.

The first thing that must be said about this outbreak of self-congratulation in official political and media circles is that it represents a form of gross self-delusion (perhaps best displayed by Bush himself, when he declared in the same interview that Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf

was “truly somebody who believes in democracy” and that, despite declaring a state of emergency and rounding up thousands of political opponents, Musharraf had not “crossed the line” that would make his conduct unacceptable to the White House.)

Moreover, while Iraqi attacks on US targets appear to have fallen compared to earlier this year, US attacks on Iraqi targets have not. The *Los Angeles Times* reported November 17, citing figures supplied by Air Force Major General David Edgington, director of air operations in Iraq, that aerial bombings by US forces had more than quadrupled, from 229 in all of 2006 to close to one thousand so far this year, about three a day.

US bombing attacks account for more than ten percent of Iraqi violent deaths since the March 2003 invasion and occupation, according to a number of published studies, and estimates of the number killed in such attacks range up to over 100,000. US air strikes frequently result in atrocities in which entire families are slaughtered because their homes were targeted as alleged terrorist hideouts.

The drop in the number of reported acts of violence in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq is relative and may well be transitory. The level of violence is still far above what it was during the first three years of the US occupation, prior to the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 which touched off 18 months of savage sectarian bloodletting, particularly by Shiite militias targeting Sunnis.

Part of the decline is no doubt due to the fact that significant sections of Baghdad are already “ethnically cleansed” as a consequence of the previous sectarian conflict. Time Magazine reporter Charles Crain, who published an article on November 19 along similar lines to the *Times* piece (“Baghdad Residents Return—Warily”) noted, “The use of Sunni men to defend Sunni enclaves hints at a more grim explanation for the drop in violence: many neighborhoods have completed their brutal sectarian segregation, leaving fewer easy targets for intimidation and murder.”

Much of the reduction is the result, not of supposed US military success, but of political decisions by several of the key forces in Iraqi politics, including Sunni tribal sheiks who have formed an alliance with the US occupation regime in return for cash, weapons and military training, and the Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr, who announced a six-month ceasefire by his Mahdi Army militia in August. In what may be a covert quid pro quo, US military forces have since then carried out comparatively few raids into the Mahdi Army strongholds

in eastern Baghdad.

Both the Sunni sheiks and al-Sadr are politically opposed to the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and claim to oppose the US occupation. They are evidently calculating that they should avoid direct confrontation with the US military while they build up their forces for the next round of civil war, perhaps after January 2009. There are certainly illusions—as widespread in Iraq as in the United States—that if a Democrat succeeds Bush in the White House there will be a significant change in US policy, including a substantial withdrawal of military forces.

Such hopes are grotesquely misplaced. The politics of the Democratic Party and the politics of the *New York Times*, which are more or less identical, take as their starting point the interests of the American ruling class in the Middle East—access to oil resources and control of a critical geo-strategic region. To the extent that the Democrats and the *Times* criticize Bush, it is not because he has waged an illegal war of aggression that has killed more than one million Iraqis, but that he has conducted the war incompetently and largely unsuccessfully, and thus weakened the world position of American imperialism.

That is what gives such a half-hearted and two-faced character to their supposed “antiwar” stance. The Democrats are constantly on their guard against the possibility that the Bush administration may “turn the corner” and win at least a temporary military respite in Iraq, which would immediately transform them from critics into cheerleaders.

The Democratic-controlled Congress has refused to cut off funding and use its power of the purse to end the war in Iraq. None of the major Democratic presidential candidates will commit to a withdrawal date from Iraq as far off as January 2013, when they would be inaugurated for a second term in office.



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