

Five years after the invasion of Iraq: A debacle for US imperialism

The editorial board
19 March 2008

Five years after Washington inaugurated its “shock and awe” campaign, striking Baghdad with cruise missiles and precision-guided bombs, it has become abundantly clear that the war of aggression against Iraq has produced the greatest geo-political disaster in American history.

The war’s costs, in terms of both US imperialism’s global position and sheer dollar amounts, have eclipsed the immense damage wrought by the protracted intervention in Vietnam nearly four decades ago. It has already lasted longer than the American Civil War, World War I, World War II and the Korean War. Even in Vietnam, after five years of major troop deployments, the withdrawal of American forces had already begun.

A “war of choice” that was launched as a demonstration of the overwhelming and irresistible force of American militarism has turned into an operational debacle that has strained the US armed forces to the breaking point and eroded the strategic position of the United States in every corner of the world.

For the Iraqi people, the war has produced a catastrophe. For the American people, as well, it has yielded nothing but suffering and tragedy. It unquestionably constitutes the single greatest war crime of the twenty-first century. In both its motivation and execution, it embodies the essential characteristics of similar crimes carried out in the last century.

The International Tribunal at Nuremberg that convicted the leaders of the Third Reich summed up its verdict with the following observation: “War is essentially an evil thing. Its consequences are not confined to the belligerent states alone, but affect the whole world. To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

The “accumulated evil” wrought by the decision to launch a war of aggression in Iraq continues to unfold. According to the most credible estimates, it has cost the lives of over 1 million Iraqis, while turning over 4 million more into refugees, driven by violence and destruction either out of their country or into internal exile.

A poll released this week that was conducted for the British Broadcasting Corporation, ABC News in the US and German and Japanese television found that nearly half of the residents of Baghdad said at least one family member had been killed since the occupation began.

The same poll found that over 70 percent of Iraqis want US troops out of their country, a sentiment that has remained steady throughout the occupation, but which is consistently ignored by the US political establishment and the mass media.

The divide-and-rule strategy employed by the US occupiers and Washington’s attempts to fashion a puppet regime based on ethnic politics created the conditions for a savage sectarian war that claimed untold victims and “ethnically cleansed” large sections of Baghdad and other areas where Shia, Sunni and Kurdish Iraqis had previously lived side-by-side.

The destruction of social infrastructure caused by American high explosives five years ago—as well as the previous years of punishing

sanctions—has only been exacerbated by the disintegration that has unfolded under US military occupation. Essential infrastructure remains devastated, with the population deprived of electricity, fuel, clean water, sanitary facilities and garbage collection, creating hellish conditions and an immense public health crisis. The killing of over 600 doctors and medical professionals and the flight of thousands of others, together with severe shortages in medicine and equipment, have left Iraq’s health sector in a state of collapse.

The death toll among US troops will soon top 4,000. At least 60,000 more have been wounded, and many thousands more American soldiers and Marines sent into this dirty colonial war have come back with severe psychological problems.

As for the costs to American society, it is now estimated that the occupation is consuming some \$12 billion a month and could total as much as \$3 trillion. A report by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress found that the war thus far has cost an average American family of four \$16,900, an amount projected to rise to \$37,000 by 2017. These vast sums have been diverted from pressing social needs in the US itself, while the massive expenditures have contributed significantly to a raging financial crisis that threatens to plunge the economy into a depression.

It is a measure of the perverse mindset of the US president—and his criminal indifference to the loss of human life—that in a video conference last week with US military personnel in Afghanistan, Bush declared himself envious of those fighting in America’s colonial-style wars, calling it “a fantastic experience” and “in some ways romantic.”

Equally delusional were the comments made by Vice President Dick Cheney during an unannounced visit to Baghdad. Cheney called the five-year war a “successful endeavor” that “has been well worth the effort.”

The reality is that five years after a US invasion that was expected by its organizers to swiftly replace the government of Saddam Hussein with a stable US client regime, 160,000 US troops remain deployed in the country and—as the extraordinary security measures surrounding Cheney, even in the fortified Green Zone, make clear—no area can be claimed to be fully secure.

The surge initiated by the Pentagon a year ago has yet to create conditions in which American commanders believe they can reduce occupation forces even to the level that existed at the beginning of the invasion. The surge, which Cheney said was responsible for a “remarkable turnaround,” has not halted the daily bloodbath. Even according to US government figures, on average 26 Iraqi civilians were killed every day in the month of February.

To a large extent, the reduction in what remains a horrific death toll is attributable not to US pacification efforts, but to the fact that the sectarian violence unleashed by the occupation has largely separated Sunni and Shia populations, leaving fewer people to kill. Meanwhile, the Pentagon is financing and arming former Sunni insurgents, who have no loyalty either to Washington or the US-backed government, but who for the moment see the Shia-dominated security forces and militias as the greatest threat.

As for Iraqi perceptions of conditions in their own country, the recent poll indicated that more than half believe the beefing up of the US troop presence in Baghdad and Anbar Province has made matters worse.

A war based on lies

As is now universally recognized, the war was prepared in 2002 and early 2003 with a campaign of deliberate lies and fabrications about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties between Baghdad and Al Qaeda, both of which proved to be non-existent.

The Bush administration, with the complicity of congressional Democrats, sought to exploit the fears and political confusion in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks to implement long-prepared plans to seize control of a country holding the world's second-largest proven oil reserves and turn it into a platform for the extension of US military power throughout the region.

Notwithstanding the popular disorientation fostered by a relentless propaganda campaign waged by both political parties and backed by a subservient media, there was broad opposition to the drive to war, reflected in massive demonstrations both in the US and around the world.

The five years since the invasion have not only seen the original lies thoroughly exposed, but also a complete discrediting of the US government and US policy in the eyes of the world's population. The old attempt to drape predatory US policies in the mantle of democracy—used to some effect during the two world wars and the Cold War that followed—is now rejected with contempt by people around the globe, who have been repulsed by the killings and repression in Iraq and atrocities such as the sadistic torture practiced at Abu Ghraib.

Of equal importance is the discrediting of the political system within the US itself. Rejecting the official story relentlessly sold by the mass media and the two major parties, the American people by a large margin have come to oppose the war. Yet it continues unabated, and the president who launched it—who is despised by millions and retains the support of less than a third of the population—retains undiminished power to pursue a policy of unrestrained militarism. Nothing could expose more thoroughly the undemocratic character and political rot that pervade the entire governmental system within the United States.

The global eruption of American militarism and the crisis of US and world capitalism are inextricably linked. In the final analysis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the threat of a new war against Iran, are a product of the attempt by the US ruling class to maintain the hegemonic position of US capitalism by military force, under conditions in which it can no longer do so by virtue of its economic weight. The most important war aims of Washington are to establish a stranglehold over the oil resources of the Middle East and Central Asia, in order to gain a decisive strategic advantage over its economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

The Iraq war is not an aberration. War is the inevitable product of a world situation dominated by the increasing tensions between a globally integrated economy and the capitalist nation state system in which the decline of US imperialism poses the most explosive consequences. Despite the failure of the US adventure in Iraq, objective pressures are pushing Washington towards new confrontations with enemies ranging from China to Russia to Venezuela.

The economic crisis that is driving this policy is not merely conjunctural, but systemic. It is now acknowledged widely within financial circles that the credit crisis that has erupted with the bursting of the housing bubble has put the United States on the edge of the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The sharpest expression of this economic crisis is the unrelenting growth

of social inequality. The financial elite's policy of using military force to gain control of world markets is pursued at the direct expense of the masses of working people, who are paying for it through attacks on their jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.

The Democrats and the war

The evolution of the 2008 election campaign has already made it clear that the American people will once again be denied the right to decide at the polls whether Washington should continue its criminal war against the Iraqi people. The Democratic Party, following a now well-worn path, is once again preparing to politically disenfranchise the substantial antiwar majority of the American electorate.

In the 2002 midterm elections, the Democratic leadership in Congress took a deliberate decision to deliver the votes needed to authorize the invasion of Iraq, reasoning that it would thus take the question of war "off the table" and enable it to wage a successful campaign based on economic issues. The result was a severe defeat that delivered both houses of Congress to the Republicans.

In 2004, the party leadership steered the nomination to two US senators—John Kerry and John Edwards—who had voted for the war in 2002 and who made it clear they had no intention of withdrawing American forces. Indeed, Kerry suggested that, if elected, he would launch his own "surge."

In 2006, the Democrats won back control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in a vote that clearly represented a popular repudiation of the war. Having gained control of Congress, the Democrats proceeded to do nothing but provide funding for the war to continue.

Now, the two remaining candidates for the Democratic nomination are locked in a national security campaign aimed at proving themselves best qualified to serve as commander-in-chief. Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have advanced platforms that provide for the continued presence of the US military in Iraq for purposes of counter-terrorism operations, the protection of US facilities and interests, and the training of Iraqi puppet forces—meaning that tens of thousands of troops would remain in the country indefinitely. Obama's former senior foreign policy advisor spelled out in a recent interview with the BBC that no one should take his promises regarding troop withdrawal too seriously, as they would be scrapped the moment he entered the White House and began consultation with the military brass.

No doubt, there exist within the ruling elite bitter divisions over the conduct of the war and plans for future US policy in Iraq. These differences, however, begin from the standpoint of advancing the interests of imperialism on a world scale and whether the tying down of immense US military power in Iraq is hindering the use of that power elsewhere. Many of the Democrats advocating troop withdrawals from Iraq are calling for these same troops to be sent to Afghanistan.

The character of the supposedly liberal opposition to the Iraq war found its most grotesque expression in last Sunday's opinion section of the *New York Times* in which the paper's editorial board called upon nine "experts on military and foreign affairs to reflect on their attitudes in the spring of 2003" to the war. All nine, without exception, were advocates of the war, most of them drawn from within the administration or from right-wing think tanks. Some, such as Richard Perle and Paul Bremer, bear direct responsibility for the atrocities carried out against the Iraqi people.

The implication is that in March 2003, everyone agreed that war against Iraq was necessary. Differences arose only afterwards due to the exposure of "faulty intelligence" and because of the Bush administration's flawed execution of this necessary act.

This is a lie. There were millions who recognized that the war was an act of criminality carried out on the basis of lies.

For its part, the *World Socialist Web Site* had no illusions as to what was behind the war or what it would produce.

As we wrote in “The crisis of American capitalism and the war against Iraq” on March 21, 2003: “All the justifications given by the Bush administration and its accomplices in London are based on half-truths, falsifications and outright lies. At this point, it should hardly be necessary to reply yet again to the claims that the purpose of this war is to destroy Iraq’s so-called ‘weapons of mass destruction.’ After weeks of the most intrusive inspections to which any country has ever been subjected, nothing of material significance was discovered.”

And we predicted accurately: “Whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict that has begun, American imperialism has a rendezvous with disaster. It cannot conquer the world. It cannot reimpose colonial shackles upon the masses of the Middle East. It will not find through the medium of war a viable solution to its internal maladies. Rather, the unforeseen difficulties and mounting resistance engendered by war will intensify all of the internal contradictions of American society.”

Today, an effective struggle against the war cannot be waged based on protests and appeals to the existing two-party system, or on yet another attempt to place greater power in the hands of the Democrats by putting Clinton or Obama in the White House and giving the party a larger majority in the Senate. What is required is a rejection of imperialism itself.

Ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and defeating the already well-advanced plans for further and even bloodier wars in Iran and elsewhere is possible only through the fight to mobilize the working class against the capitalist system that is the source of war.

This means an irreconcilable break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new mass political movement of working people based on a socialist and internationalist program.

This is the alternative which the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will fight to place at the center of the struggles to come in the run-up to the November election, advancing the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and demanding that those who conspired to launch these wars of aggression be held accountable, both politically and legally.

We urge all of our readers and supporters to draw the lessons of five years of the Iraq war and join us in this fight for the independent political mobilization of working people in the United States and internationally against imperialism.



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