Bush orders Iraq escalation to continue

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In a brief televised speech delivered just before noon Thursday, President Bush announced that there would be no further reduction of US troop strength once the current drawdown of forces is completed in July. This means that some 140,000 US soldiers will remain in occupation of the country through the November election, and likely until Bush leaves the White House on January 20, 2009.

The speech followed two days of testimony on Capitol Hill by General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. While their appearance before a series of House and Senate committees provided the semblance of consultation with the legislature, the decision to maintain US troop strength was taken weeks ago and made public well in advance in both Baghdad and Washington.

Bush himself barely gave lip service to a congressional role in foreign policy in his 15-minute speech, saying only that Congress had to pass as soon as possible the latest $108 billion emergency war funding bill submitted by the administration. "Members of Congress must pass a bill that provides our troops the resources they need," he said, "and does not tie the hands of our commanders or impose artificial timelines for withdrawal."

As in dozens of previous speeches on Iraq, Bush portrayed the war, which began with the unprovoked US invasion in March 2003, as part of a global struggle against Al Qaeda terrorists—although there was no Al Qaeda presence in Iraq until the US invasion, and the Islamic fundamentalists were deeply hostile to the secular nationalist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

There was a prominent addition to the roster of enemies, however, as White House speechwriters worked Iraq's neighbor, Iran, into the address. At one point Bush declared, "Iraq is the convergence point for two of the greatest threats to America in this new century: Al Qaeda and Iran." (Neither, of course, had significant influence until the US invasion shattered the Baathist regime in Baghdad.) Bush later said, "If we succeed in Iraq, after all that Al Qaeda and Iran have invested there, it'd be a historic blow to the global terrorist movement and a severe setback for Iran."

This rhetorical joining of two antagonists—the Al Qaeda leaders are fundamentalist Sunnis who regard Shiites, like the Iranian mullahs, as apostates and renegades—is typical of the Bush administration's propaganda. The hope is that constant repetition of such fabricated associations will prepare the American public for the next radical shift in US foreign policy, from a counterinsurgency war against Iraqis to air strikes or even a major invasion of Iran.

The speech exuded the growing crisis of the Bush administration in its final months. The brevity of the address and the perfunctory delivery, even by Bush's dismal standards, suggest a White House going through the motions, barely able to summon the energy to trot out the usual lies and distortions which world public opinion, and the American people, have largely discounted.

The repeated invocations of "freedom" and "democracy" as the goals of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq coincided with the attempts of the US-backed puppet regime in Baghdad to physically exterminate the most widely-based Iraqi political movement—that headed by the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Bush described the military offensive against Sadr's forces, ordered by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as "operations in Basra that make clear a free Iraq will no longer tolerate the lawlessness by Iranian-backed militants."

As it happened, the military operation was a complete failure, with Iraqi government forces requiring rescue by the US and British military, and Maliki compelled to send representatives to the Iranian religious capital, Qom, to plead with Sadr for a ceasefire. Fighting is still continuing on a lesser scale, particularly in the stronghold of Sadr's Mahdi Army militia in the Sadr City neighborhood on the east side of Baghdad.

Bush also painted a delusional picture of improving economic and financial conditions in Iraq—a country with an unemployment rate over 50 percent, no functioning banking system, a chronic lack of electrical power and clean drinking water, and 4.5 million displaced people.

The speech combined warnings about the dire consequences of an American defeat with overblown claims about the success produced by the increase in US troop strength from 130,000 to 160,000 last year. Bush said that as a result of this escalation of the war—initially dubbed a "surge" to suggest that the troop buildup was temporary—"a major strategic shift has occurred. Fifteen months ago, America and the Iraqi government were on the defensive. Today, we have the initiative."

The president did not bother to explain why his depiction of Iraq flatly contradicts the optimistic statements that were made by the White House in previous years. Prior to the launching of

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the “surge” in January of 2007, equally grandiose accounts of success on the part of the US occupation were being made regularly by White House spokesmen. Vice President Cheney said the Iraqi resistance was “in its last throes” at a time when, in retrospect, the administration now admits the US occupation regime was losing ground.

Neither the servile media nor Bush’s Democratic collaborators hold the administration to account for its ever-changing but always mendacious descriptions of “progress” in Iraq. Nor do they raise the real and horrifying conditions facing the population of that tortured country—more than 1 million dead, 2 million internally displaced, 2.5 million refugees, mainly in Syria and Jordan, and the complete devastation of what was once among the most prosperous and economically advanced countries in the Arab world.

The criticism of the administration by congressional Democrats and the two candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, remained entirely within the framework of what is best for the American “national interest,” without the slightest outrage expressed over the ongoing crimes committed by the occupation regime against the Iraqi people.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sent a letter to the White House, after Petraeus’s testimony, condemning “a war that has claimed more than 4,000 American lives ... cost nearly a trillion dollars that could have been used to meet urgent needs at home and damaged the reputation of the United States in the eyes of the world.” She warned that an over-commitment to Iraq was allowing a threat from Al Qaeda on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to “grow because our resource commitment in Iraq makes it is impossible to respond adequately.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid noted the Catch 22 character of the Bush administration policy in Iraq. “When violence is up, the president says we cannot bring our troops home,” he said. “When violence dips, the president says we cannot bring our troops home.” He complained that Bush was squandering “America’s limited resources” and “leaving all the tough decisions to the next administration. President Bush has an exit strategy for only one man, himself, on January 20, 2009.”

Senator Clinton attacked Bush for failing to spell out an exit strategy for Iraq, and the Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, for backing an open-ended war, while at the same time attempting to criticize her opponent for the Democratic nomination, Senator Obama, as insufficiently antiwar. “One candidate will continue the war and keep troops in Iraq indefinitely, one candidate only says he’ll end the war,” she said, “and one candidate is ready, willing and able to end the war and to rebuild our military while honoring our soldiers and our veterans.”

Clinton initially positioned herself as the most right-wing of the Democratic presidential candidates on the war, refusing to apologize for her 2002 vote to authorize the US invasion or to set a deadline for withdrawal. With her chances to win the nomination dwindling, Clinton is making a desperate and transparently insincere appeal to popular antiwar sentiment.

Obama, for his part, attacked both Clinton and McCain for their 2002 votes to authorize the war, and, at a town hall meeting in a Philadelphia suburb, asked again, “why we want to invade a country like Iraq that had nothing to do with 9/11.” At the same time, he reiterated his support for “success” in Iraq, without defining it, and called for a major increase in manpower for both the Army and the Marines, and for an escalation of the US military intervention in Afghanistan.

The conflict between the Democrats and the Republicans is a factional struggle within the ruling elite in which both sides conceal the predatory war aims behind US imperialism’s military aggression in Iraq.

Bush, McCain and the congressional Republicans declare that an American withdrawal from Iraq would be a colossal blow to the United States’ worldwide position. Clinton, Obama and the congressional Democrats declare that the Iraq war has become an endless and unproductive squandering of resources with devastating long-term effects on the capabilities of the US military.

Both, in a sense, are right. American imperialism is caught in a trap of its own manufacture: unable to withdraw from Iraq without a shattering loss of political authority, not only internationally but also at home, unable to win a war which has no definable end point except the physical extermination of the bulk of the Iraqi people, who will never accept the establishment of a US-backed semi-colonial regime that opens up the country’s oil resources to American corporations.

Left entirely out of this discussion are the sentiments of the vast majority of the American people, who, according to poll after poll, overwhelmingly favor the quickest possible withdrawal of American troops from Iraq—a position repudiated by all factions in both of the corporate-controlled political parties.

A Rasmussen telephone survey Monday found that 65 percent of Americans would like all US troops out of Iraq within a year, the highest total ever reported supporting a rapid withdrawal. Some 26 percent want troops brought home immediately. A separate poll by AP-Ipsos, published Thursday, found that Bush’s approval rating has hit a new low of 28 percent.

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