

Washington's new alibi for a criminal war: the "surge has worked"

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26 June 2008

A growing consensus has emerged within the US political establishment, extending to both major parties and the predominant sections of the mass media that the so-called "surge"—the Bush administration's euphemism for military escalation—has "worked."

Supporters of this thesis point to figures supplied by the Pentagon showing a decline in death tolls—among both US troops and Iraqi civilians alike—compared to the horrific totals recorded at the beginning of last year, before the arrival of the additional 40,000 US troops.

According to figures compiled by Iraqi security forces, 532 Iraqis were killed last month either by US occupation troops, Iraqi government forces, insurgent attacks or sectarian violence. Nineteen US soldiers and Marines lost their lives in Iraq in May. Both represent roughly a quarter the number killed in January 2007.

While a significant reduction compared to the appalling 1,920 Iraqi civilians reported killed in January of last year, this official toll undoubtedly represents a gross underestimation of the real number of deaths, many of which go unreported. Even on its face—at nearly 18 a day—it represents a terrible loss of life and the continuation of a simmering insurgency.

Moreover, nearly three times as many US troops were killed in April as in May while the Iraqi death toll numbered in the thousands, as fighting raged in Basra and the slums of Baghdad's Sadr City. There is no evidence that the underlying social and political tensions, much less the strength of the US-backed Iraqi regime, have been transformed over the space of a month.

Indeed, the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan investigative arm of the US Congress issued a report this week stressing the narrow character of the surge's supposed success and insisting that a new strategy is needed.

The GAO reported that the number of armed attacks in Iraq had declined from about 180 a day in June 2007 to about 50 per day in February 2008. It attributed the decline to the pouring in of the additional US combat troops as well as the Pentagon's arming and paying Sunni militia forces like the Sons of Iraq, and the ceasefire maintained by the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr.

Clearly, these are hardly firm foundations for the success claimed by the surge's proponents. The additional combat troops are to be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of next month. The Sunni militias' alliance of convenience with the US occupation forces is based upon their fear of and hostility toward the US-backed Shia-dominated central government, while, as the fighting this spring demonstrated, the Mahdi Army truce can collapse at any time.

"The security environment remains volatile and dangerous," the report concludes. It paints a picture of an Iraqi regime that is wholly dysfunctional. Barely 10 percent of Iraqi security forces are capable of operating independently of US occupation troops, the GAO points out, while the government has failed to spend more than 24 percent of the funds allocated for the country's reconstruction because of "violence and

sectarian strife, shortage of skilled labor, and weak procurement and budgeting systems."

As a result, despite nearly \$5 billion in US investment in the country's electricity sector, it is capable of meeting barely half the country's demand for power, with electricity available in Baghdad barely eight hours a day.

Other essential social indices are just as bad. According to the GAO, due to the continuing breakdown of basic infrastructure as well as the mass displacement of the Iraqi population by armed violence, "only one in three Iraqi children under the age of 5 has access to safe drinking water, and only 17 percent of Iraq's sewage is treated before being discharged into the country's rivers and waterways," creating the conditions for deadly epidemics.

There are, as well, signs that the May lull in casualties has come to an end in June. A series of violent incidents took place this week, two of them at meetings of local councils formed by the occupation to assist in controlling hostile areas.

On Monday, a Sunni council member in a town southeast of Baghdad, described as someone the US forces "used to love," opened fire on American troops after a weekly meeting, killing two and wounding three, as well as an interpreter, before being killed himself.

At a council meeting in Baghdad's Sadr City the next day, a bomb went off, killing 10 people, including two US soldiers and two US civilian government employees. Just hours later, three American soldiers and an interpreter were killed by a roadside bomb in the northern province of Nineveh.

None of this dissuades the surge's proponents, who are fully engaged in the spinning of a "new narrative" about Iraq, based on the thesis that the "surge has worked." How or why the US war began, they insist, is irrelevant, the only question is to build on this purported success.

The campaign of the Republican Party's presumptive presidential candidate Senator John McCain rests heavily on this contention, with McCain claiming credit for backing the surge. Together with the bulk of the media, the Republicans have shamed their Democratic rivals into embracing this theory.

Thus, Obama recently declared "how encouraged" he was by "the reductions in violence in Iraq" and vowed that "an Obama administration will make sure that we continue with the progress that's been made in Iraq, that we won't act precipitously."

While he postured in the Democratic primaries as an antiwar candidate, vowing to withdraw US troops from Iraq, Obama's platform has always envisioned a substantial US force remaining in the country for "counter-terrorism" operations and to protect US interests. A more concrete insight into the thinking of the Democratic establishment came in the form of a paper drafted in April by Obama's key adviser on Iraq, Colin Kahl, professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

Entitled "Stay on Success: A Policy of Conditional Engagement," Kahl proposal calls for negotiations with the Iraqi government to allow

Washington “to transition to a sustainable over-watch posture (of perhaps 60,000-80,000 forces) by the end of 2010.”

So much for illusions that the election of Obama in November will spell an end to the five-year-old war and occupation.

Meanwhile, from the media there is a steady drumbeat from the editorial pages of the major dailies as well as from the broadcast pundits along the same lines.

This one-sided debate over the merits of the surge unfolds in the context of a virtual blackout of news about the ongoing struggle in Iraq. While on the whole never too penetrating, reporting by the media has all but disappeared.

According to a recent survey published by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, major news outlets are devoting less than 1 percent of their coverage to events in the occupied country. During the second week of this month, in which the deaths of 153 Iraqis and seven US troops were recorded, the media gave the Iraq war less than half the coverage it devoted to the tomato salmonella scare.

Under these conditions, Thomas Friedman, the foreign affairs columnist of the *New York Times*, a leading media propagandist for the war in 2002-2003, now writes that “debating the merits of the war” is pointless, and that, based on the surge’s supposed gains, the real question is: “can something decent still be salvaged there at an acceptable cost—something that can still serve our interests, do right by Iraqis and maybe put in place the seeds of an open society that will pay long-term benefits?”

Meanwhile, Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post*, one of the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for American militarism in the Middle East, wrote a column demanding that McCain to “make the election about Iraq,” while insisting that “everything is changed,” and “we are winning on every front.”

Finally, David Brooks, one of the right-wing editorial columnists of the *New York Times* published a column Tuesday entitled “The Bush Paradox,” attempting to utilize the surge to salvage the reputation of a man who is arguably the most unpopular occupant of the White House in US history.

“One thing is clear,” writes Brooks. “Every personal trait that led Bush to make a hash of the first years of the war led him to make a successful decision when it came to this crucial call.”

Among the traits Brooks attributes to Bush are “stubbornness, that unwillingness to accept defeat on his watch,” without which, he says, “he never would have bucked the opposition to the surge.”

He describes the US president as “outrageously self-confident,” a quality that supposedly allowed him to “overrule” generals who opposed the escalation.

Brooks criticizes Bush as being “secretive” and having listened “too much to Dick Cheney,” but quickly adds: “the uncomfortable fact is that Cheney played an essential role in promoting the surge. Many of the people who are dubbed bad guys actually got this one right.”

As this column makes clear, this entire cynical exercise in propagandizing about the success of the surge is aimed at exonerating US officials guilty of war crimes, while accustoming the American population to the prospect of an indefinite occupation of Iraq.

But what precisely is the “success” that they are all talking about, how was it achieved and what purpose is it to serve? These questions are glided over with fatuous phrases such as Friedman’s talk about “sowing seeds of an open society.”

What has been sown is death and destruction on a massive scale. In Iraq, Washington has carried out the greatest crimes against humanity of the new century.

The secret to the supposed success of the surge is plain to see. If you kill over a million people, wound and maim perhaps three times that many, turn five million more into exiles or refugees in their own land, round up tens of thousands of the young men who have survived this slaughter and

imprison them without charges in detention camps, it is possible to achieve a temporary suppression of popular resistance.

The “personal traits” of George W. Bush that equipped him to preside over such a venture are gross ignorance, sadism, an unflinching commitment to the interests of the financial aristocracy into which he was born, and an absolute contempt for the suffering of working people. He is, in short, a mental cipher and a moral cripple.

No doubt from Berlin in 1939 the Nazi “surge” into Poland also seemed a great success, achieved by similar methods, and there were many who attributed this to the “personal traits,” including the stubbornness and self-confidence, of Germany’s Führer.

For the millions upon millions of people in the US and around the world who have opposed the US intervention in Iraq from the outset, the issue was not whether mass killing and the systematic destruction of a society would “work,” but rather opposition to a criminal war of aggression.

That such arguments have an impact upon the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate only underscores the bipartisan political consensus in Washington over the central aim of this war: US hegemony over the Persian Gulf and control over Iraq’s oil reserves.

Now, with the report that the Iraqi regime has signed no-bid contracts with the big oil conglomerates—the very same US and British firms kicked out of the country 36 years ago when Baghdad nationalized its oil industry—the purpose of all this killing comes clearly into focus and, along with it, the source of the official consensus that “the surge is working.”

This conventional wisdom is not shared, however, by the masses of people in either Iraq or the US itself. Recent polls in Iraq show three quarters of the population wanting US troops out of their country and barely one quarter expressing the belief that they have improved security. In the US, poll after poll has shown two thirds of the people opposing the war and supporting the withdrawal of American occupation forces.

In the end, neither the surge nor the war as a whole have laid the foundations for stability in Iraq. The destruction of a society and the killing, maiming or violent displacement of fully a third of its population can create only continuous turmoil and ultimately a resurgence of mass resistance.

Meanwhile, in the US itself, the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on this war have contributed to the onset of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, creating the conditions for an eruption of mass social struggles.



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