



Washington's Wars and Occupations **Month in Review #38**

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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STOPPING THE WAR OF TORTURE AND LIES

The disconnect in this month's news is stunning even by the Bush era's low standards:

The President's former press secretary, a longtime member of Bush's Texas inner circle, writes that his boss did not tell the truth and manipulated public opinion in order to sell the Iraq war. An official report from the Senate Intelligence Committee says the same thing.

A Government Accountability Office report says that most of the goals Bush outlined for Iraq 18 months ago remain unmet and that the administration lacks an up-to-date strategy for the conflict.

An avalanche of on-the-record testimony shows that specific plans for torture were approved at the highest levels of the Bush administration. Retired General Antonio Taguba, head of the first official investigation of detainee abuse, matter-of-factly writes: "The commander-in-chief and those under him authorized a systematic regime of torture" (http://brokenlives.info/?page_id=23).

All on top of weekly stories detailing Washington's losing effort in Afghanistan, setbacks to U.S.-backed figures in Pakistan and Lebanon, and most recently the complete failure of the U.S.-financed Arabic-language al-Hurra TV station designed to "win hearts and minds" in the Middle East.

And yet, Washington politics – and Washington's wars – continue more or less as usual. The administration blathers that it's "turned the corner" and arm-twists its reluctant clients in Baghdad for an agreement that will legalize permanent occupation. Congress authorizes \$163 billion for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through early 2009 with no strings attached. Congressional Democrats strike a "compromise" with the White House that would allow surveillance without warrants and grant immunity to Telecoms that already broke the law.

Meanwhile polls show tremendous discontent among the U.S. people: a record 76% say the country is on the wrong track. And antiwar sentiment clearly influenced the Democratic presidential primary. But active outrage from below is not at the level where every politician is forced every single day to address government war crimes and the daily deaths of Iraqis and U.S. soldiers.

This contradictory landscape tells us a good deal about what the antiwar movement is up against. It casts a sharp spotlight on the strategies of both the Bush/Neocon axis and the elite faction that wants to change course. And it offers a window into the state of public opinion and popular movements that is indispensable for determining effective antiwar strategies.

THE NEOCONS: NEVER RETREAT, NEVER SURRENDER

Now led by John McCain, the Neocons are as shameless as they've been under Bush.

Utterly failed policies? Blatant lies exposed? One-time claims about "opposing torture" conveniently abandoned? Inconvenient details! The course they advocate is completely unchanged: Stay in Iraq forever. Rely on military force and threaten to attack Iran. Anything in the way of unchecked Presidential power (say, the U.S. Constitution) is simply to be bypassed.

Sell your line to the public? Forget facts or the actual results Neocon policies. Instead pump up the volume in fear-mongering, race-baiting and demonizing Arabs and Muslims. Stay the course in claiming that any dissent from "Bomb, Bomb, Bomb" aids terrorism.

Even some Neocons realize this might not work in 2008. They recognize that the right is on the brink of losing what they thought was within their grasp in the weeks after 9/11: 50-years of one-party rule. They are frightened that a drubbing in November may produce an irreparable fracturing of the right-wing coalition that has held the ideological initiative for 30 years.

Never inclined to "play defense," the Neocon response is again: Attack, Attack, Attack. They hope to keep substantial portions of their foreign policy agenda at the helm even if they go down to electoral defeat. Rehearsals are already underway for a loud "Don't Stab America in the Back!" barrage to be unleashed immediately if they lose November 4. The Neocons haven't played by the previously accepted rules of mainstream politics for the last eight years. (The latest evidence: a Justice Department report showing the Bushies illegally used political criteria to hire U.S. Attorneys.) They certainly won't play by those rules going forward, whether they hold executive power or not.

THE REALISTS: READJUST – BUT CAREFULLY

In response to Bush's disastrous policy failures, big sections of the U.S. elite have decided a change of course is needed. Ever since the Baker-Hamilton/Iraq Study Group report was issued in December 2006, a growing contingent of Washington heavyweights, former military brass, and "respectable" experts have rallied to its conclusions: No military victory can be won in Iraq. The war must be "wound down" rather than heated up (not least to relieve the enormous strain on an overstretched U.S. military). Diplomatic engagement with Iran and other neighboring countries is needed to try to smooth this retrenchment from Middle East over-reach. Voices within this camp also (mostly) call for closing Guantánamo, ending torture, and returning to the less one-sided balance between executive and congressional power that existed before 9/11.

These power-brokers are absolutely serious about this kind of policy readjustment. They are convinced change is necessary to minimize the damage Bush's Iraq fiasco has done to U.S. power.

For a very different set of reasons, the majority of people across the globe are eager to see change in this same direction. They understand that every check on Washington's use of military force means saving lives and opening up space for people in Iraq, the Middle East, and worldwide to determine their own destiny. Likewise, even though any U.S. President would announce that de-escalation was a mark of Washington's "success," the world will not be fooled. Everyone knows that even a small withdrawal from Iraq and a "downsizing" of U.S. stated goals means the empire has been forced to retreat. That will only whet appetites for pushing Washington totally out. Partial retreats in a country where the vast majority of people don't want you there are very tough to pull off. Once an empire starts down that road, there are unintended consequences and the real prospect that occupation will totally collapse.

Washington's "realist" heavyweights know this too. So they want to keep their readjustment as controlled and minimal as possible. "Wind it down" in Iraq, but consider complete withdrawal only as a worst-case "last resort." Bash Bush's conduct of the war (and Iraqis alleged failure to "step up") but stay away from any implication that the U.S. shouldn't have the right to push other countries around, period. Stress diplomacy in contrast to Neocon bullheadedness, but repeat ad nauseum that the U.S. should only negotiate "from a position of strength." Tap into popular discontent to maximize chances to defeat McCain and the Neocons, but concede only as much to grassroots sentiment as forced by popular pressure.

This tightrope walk is evident in all manifestations of elite opposition to Bush-McCain, including the course taken by Barack Obama since he won the Democratic presidential nomination.

THE U.S. PUBLIC: EAGER FOR BIGGER CHANGES, BUT VULNERABLE

The majority of the U.S. population is in a different place. They are sick of the Iraq war. Millions have been won to the antiwar movement's view that it should never have been launched. People – especially communities of color, youth and the poor – want the war to end.

Yet it remains difficult to translate that sentiment into forceful, week-to-week action. Partly this is because many who oppose the war are worried in various ways about the consequences of a complete U.S. withdrawal – for Iraqis, for "American security," or both. This layer remains vulnerable to arguments that the U.S. occupation, even if it began under the cover of lies, is somehow "doing some good." Millions of others, more convinced that the U.S. must get out, have concluded that nothing they do can possibly budge the Bush administration (or a McCain one), and therefore a pre-condition for ending the war is to make sure the Republicans are beaten in November. This viewpoint, which is completely sensible as far as it goes, fuels a good deal of the passion behind Obama's candidacy. (But hardly all the passion: the excitement about electing the first African American President is palpable in every large city and beyond). It simultaneously accounts for much of the gap between sentiment against the war and the small size of non-electoral protest this spring and summer.

Of course activists who have been working day-in and day-out for five years have hoped for a stronger and more aggressive opposition. But change almost always happens slower than we'd like. The U.S. people have been battered materially and bombarded ideologically by 30-plus years of conservative hegemony. Key progressive constituencies – the African American community, immigrants, organized labor – have been special targets of right-

wing attack. Then 9/11 was exploited to the hilt by a right wing that believed just a few years ago that they were headed toward permanent Republican rule and global dominance forever. Against that backdrop, we should draw strength and hope from the fact that mainstream press headlines now bemoan the “decline of U.S. hegemony” rather than claim “new American century”; that 2008 offers a chance to deal a huge blow to the bloodstained Neocons; and that the majority of the U.S. people have turned against the war.

GAINING THE MORAL AND POLITICAL HIGH GROUND

Yet more is needed. One thing that would make a tremendous difference would be a political pole that has gained the moral high ground *in the eyes of broad masses* while articulating a consistent peace-and-justice program. We have seen glimpses of such a phenomenon when the spotlight was on Gold Star Mom Cindy Sheehan and her demand for a face-to-face meeting with Bush; and when millions of immigrants and their allies took to the streets May 1, 2006 saying we are workers with full human dignity, not criminals. And there are historical examples of the tremendous impact such a force can have: the role the Abolitionist movement led by figures such as Frederick Douglass played in re-shaping nationwide debate and forcing vacillating leaders to finally confront slavery; or the way Martin Luther King, Jr. and the selfless young people of SNCC forced the country not just to confront the realities of Jim Crow but to consider a “revolution of values” in all spheres and a serious change in the racial distribution of political power. At times when our side was able to project such a moral/political vision in front of the entire country, progressives not only gained a substantial popular base, but were able to participate in broad alliances in a way that forced segments of the powers-that-be to bend to popular demands, thus changing the course of U.S. history.

One cannot simply will such a force into being. It requires the accumulation of strength via grassroots organizing combined with audacious projection of both critique and positive vision before the country as a whole. (Plus a dose of luck and a favorable set of social and economic circumstances.) Still, it would be useful for the antiwar movement to keep its eye on that prize, doing all we can to lay the groundwork for such a force to come into being through the election season and beyond. Were this to gain traction, and if it is combined with the largest possible repudiation of the right-wing by a populace that has decided the ballot box is the most effective weapon available right now, we will be in the best possible position to push elite realists to their “last resort” and get the U.S. totally out of Iraq.

HERE’S ONE IMMEDIATE ACTION ITEM: The National Religious Campaign Against Torture, in alliance with Evangelicals for Human Rights and the Center for Victims of Torture, have launched an effort that calls upon the President to issue an executive order banning torture. For full information and to lend your support, go to:
www.nrnat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=211&Itemid=160

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