

Debate on US Troop Withdrawal fails to Acknowledge War Crimes & Violation of Iraq's Sovereignty

Opportunity for the Peace Movement

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Global Research, December 01, 2006

1 December 2006

Region: [USA](#)

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There is a surreal quality to the nationwide political debate about the Iraq war now taking place in the United States.

The primary emphasis of the debate is not upon the unjust, illegal and immoral nature of the war, but upon the Bush Administration's failure to secure a decisive victory. In his only direct reference to Iraq war policy so far, Robert Gates, President George W. Bush's nominee to replace Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, was critical this week of the Pentagon's failure to ³prepare adequately² for suppressing resistance to the occupation.

The debate so far is not about Washington's use of "shock and awe" violence to extend its economic, political and military hegemony over the entire Middle East and its abundant oil resources, but about President Bush's blunders in ³handling² the invasion and occupation, and Rumsfeld's failure to send enough troops to get the job done properly.

The arguments about if and when to withdraw do not mention America's violation of Iraq's national sovereignty and independence, or the tragic toll of Iraqi civilian deaths, but concentrate instead on the possible loss of U.S. political influence, military credibility and geopolitical dominance. They certainly do not touch upon imperial aggression. Instead, it's about honorable intentions gone wrong through miscalculation and ignorance.

Aspects of the national debate have degenerated to the absurd point where the collaborationist Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki is being blamed for preventing the U.S. from withdrawing its troops, as though there was no invasion, occupation, and continuing effort to achieve military victory. Here's an example of such imperial arrogance from an editorial in the Nov. 29 New York Times:

"Mr. Bush needs to make clear that Americans' patience has all but run out and that he will start bringing the troops home unless Mr. Maliki moves to rein in sectarian bloodletting and Iraqi troops start shouldering more of the burden. Mr. Bush does not need to insult Mr. Maliki by barking out orders. But he does need to make clear that he can hold off demands for an American withdrawal for only so long."

The peace and progressive movements must enter this public debate much more forcefully to change its emphasis, making it clear that the horrors taking place today in Iraq are

primarily attributable not to Maliki, al-Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, Iraq or Syria but to the actions of the U.S. government in invading and occupying Iraq.

This includes the daily killings due to military, sectarian and criminal violence, the joblessness, the malnutrition, the lack of electricity, the mounting poverty, the breakdown of social services, the closed schools, the dreadful childhoods, the increasing subjugation of women, the collapsing economy, the developing civil war, the crumbling of secular governance, the lack of adequate medical care, the constant indignity of foreign occupation and the deaths of over 600,000 Iraqi civilians in an unjust, illegal war that has now lasted longer than World War II.

Our government's war crimes in Iraq have been made possible by the complicity of our two ruling political parties and the great majority of our politicians, by our tax monies, our media, our racism, our educational and religious institutions, our military-industrial complex, our corporations, our national hubris and sense of superiority, our overwhelming military power in quest of economic acquisition, and our inexcusably misplaced patriotism in the service of imperialism.

The main public focus of the national debate on Iraq is now on the question of when to withdraw U.S. troops. But the real focus within America's ruling circles is on these four possibilities, which are obviously being considered by the Iraq Study Group (ISG):

First, is there still a realistic chance for a decisive military-political victory within a matter of months or a year or two at most? If so, as some think, there is a real possibility the U.S. will go for it, though with token withdrawals to silence public criticism and no deadline for getting out. If successful, this would lead to a very long occupation. It is highly doubtful this option will emerge from the ISG because it is apparent by now that a military victory is simply beyond reach.

Second, is there a chance for partial victory? Can Washington retain some long-term political and economic influence in this oil-rich country? This would entail propping up the present and successor collaborationist regimes in Baghdad, paying the bills, greatly increasing the air war, accelerating the training of an Iraqi puppet army, and satisfying peace sentiment in the U.S. by sending some troops home, some to nearby bases in the Middle East where they will remain on call for future intervention, and some to impregnable permanent bases inside Iraq, from whence they will debouch for occasional emergencies under heavy air cover. If successful, which is dubious, the U.S. would remain in Iraq for many years.

Third, if it seems impossible to extract any profit from Washington's huge investment in the war, perhaps the U.S. can conceal its losses in one of two ways:

First, declare victory, at least in establishing "democracy," and begin to leave. Second, declare that America's selfless effort to protect Iraqi democracy is being undermined by a Sunni-Shi'ite civil war in which it is best not to get involved, and begin to leave. Inherent in either plan is an orderly and gradual withdrawal to avoid conveying the impression of a military defeat that would undermine U.S. global dominance.

Fourth, any combination of the above that works in America's favor, even if it means splitting Iraq into three parts or utilizing the good offices of Syria or Iran. At minimum, the final option must cover up the fact that the world's greatest military power was sent packing

by a decentralized, poorly armed informal coalition of disparate resistance groups amounting to under 20,000 effectives.

The Iraq Study Group, led by former Republican Secretary of State James Baker and Democratic ex-Rep. Lee Hamilton, has been charged with making recommendations for Washington's future course in Iraq. It's 10 members are divided between the two ruling parties. The group will issue a report Dec. 6 that is intended to unify U.S. public opinion behind a policy that offers a chance for partial victory. This means a possible reach for option two above, with three and four as backup when it fails. Butler, who is dominant in the group, and the Republican members, want to insure that Iraq is off the table before the 2008 presidential elections, mainly by making it a truly bipartisan war or by having the Bush Administration take credit for ending it one way or the other.

There is one overriding factor missing from these options. The great majority of the Iraqi people want the U.S. to leave immediately or just a little later, according to a State Department poll this summer. They believe the presence of American troops is making a difficult situation a great deal worse and that < despite present sectarian infighting and the Kurdish impulse to create a separate country in the north < only the Iraqi people, perhaps helped by some of their neighbors, can restore peace and stability to this shattered land.

The question of immediate withdrawal has been rejected by leaders of America's two ruling parties and the various elites < including those who control the mass media and the principal institutions of intellectual and social coercion in U.S. society < who are responsive to the predilections of wealth and power. In general, these are the same forces that have supported the war from the beginning. They now either still seek victory or at least a way out of a serious dilemma with what they call "honor," as though even in withdrawal there could be an iota of honor or moral character or dignity associated with any aspect of the Bush Administration's criminal intrusion into Iraq.

The principal U.S. national antiwar coalitions have been calling for immediate withdrawal for years. It is a correct demand, morally and politically. It is a demand that creates a political polarity against which all other options put forward by the political establishment must be measured < from continuing the fight for imperial victory to phased and perhaps partial withdrawal. Without the progressive polarity of a call for immediate withdrawal, all other options will shift to the right.

It is said that immediate withdrawal would amount in effect to acknowledgement of defeat; that it would suggest mighty America was not invincible; that it might encourage those who seek a multipolar leadership in the world instead of unipolar governance by the U.S. superpower alone.

There is some truth to this, which makes another good argument for immediate withdrawal, in our opinion. After all, what is the peace movement's objective < to preserve Washington's honor or to expose its dishonor? To serve Washington's imperial interests, or the interests of its victims? To build up the U.S. Armed Forces for another aggressive adventure, perhaps to Iran or Syria or Cuba or Venezuela, or to strengthen the safeguards against its use for nefarious purposes?

It is said that immediate withdrawal would cause chaos in Iraq. This is disingenuous since the chaos began in March 2003 when the U.S. bombed and invaded Iraq, and it has gotten worse every day throughout the American occupation. Iraq is disintegrating before our eyes

because of the U.S. presence, not despite it.

The Democrats will take control of Congress on Jan. 3 on the basis of mass public opposition to the war. We shall see what happens. Given political realities it is impossible to be optimistic about what the new majority will actually accomplish in foreign and military policy.

The new Democratic Congress will have a chance to vote for legislation to cut off funds for the war introduced by Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.) and strongly supported by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), but few will dare venture to join them. In February Congress will vote on another supplementary request for some \$125 billion to keep the war going. Soon after that will be debate on the new half-trillion dollar-plus annual military budget. It will be interesting to observe how the newly elected peace candidates respond to these opportunities. On a previous supplementary war funding bill in September, fewer than two dozen House members, out of nearly 400, voted in opposition at a time when the Congressional Out of Iraq Caucus had some 70 members.

It is clear that now is not the time for the peace movement to rest upon its well-deserved laurels for having helped in a major way to change public opinion sufficiently to end Republican control of the House and Senate. Democratic victory or not, however, Congress is hardly going to lead the antiwar struggle.

Thus, it's time to get back into the streets and meeting halls to demand a swift end to the war. The peace, progressive and left movements must seize the opportunity presented by the deep peace sentiment expressed by the people in the November elections to increase their antiwar education, agitation and mass actions.

The political outcome of the antiwar struggle for the next two years will be decisive for Iraq and potentially influential in curbing Washington's aggressive propensities for the next several years. Let's not waste any time.

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