

Further Nuggets From the Nuthouse

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The Law of Conservation of the Level of Violence

It is interesting and depressing to see that as Obama calls for some kind of withdrawal or at least substantial cutbacks of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, at the same time he calls for escalation in Afghanistan. By doing this he hopes to ease the threat of vulnerability to accusations of weakness on “national security,” and an un- or anti-American “cut and run” perspective. This has long been a problem for the Democrats, who have a mass-populist constituency that would like some transfer of government-disposed resources to their pressing civilian needs. The establishment, including the mainstream media, therefore keep the pressure on to assure that the Democrats stay in line, and the Democrats often compensate and even over-compensate to demonstrate their integration into an imperialist world view and weapons culture. Both Gore and Bush wanted a bigger military budget back in 2000 (Nader, who wanted cuts, was marginalized); and both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama on the recent campaign trail have called for a larger army to meet U.S. “defense” needs. Now Obama wants us to take on to a bigger commitment to violence in Afghanistan. This will keep the arms cargo ships and planes busy and the bomb factories and plane and missile factories working at full capacity, but of course those wanting infrastructure improvements and resources for teachers and health care workers will have to wait and “hope” for a better future after our enemies are defeated and full hegemony and stability are established. They need a good dollop of “vision.”

The Law of Conservation of the Level of Violence thus rests on the structure of power and its reflection in politics. If you want to compete in politics in the militarized America of today you can't scrimp on money for “national security” and you need to display a readiness to exercise a “muscular” foreign policy. If you call for reduced forces in country A you must urge their increase in country B. Keep those muscles in shape and bombs dropping.

“I think maybe today we create many Vietcong”

One of my favorite quotations from the Vietnam war era was the one just cited: “I think maybe today we create many Vietcong,” words of a Vietnamese collaborator-helicopter pilot answering a question by Master Sergeant Donald Duncan while both were on a plane which had just dropped bombs on a Vietnamese target. The Vietnam war was a murderous capital intensive war, with millions of tons of bombs dropped on villages deemed supportive of the indigenous enemy, along with napalm, phosphorus and rice-killing chemicals. (Napalm and rice-killing chemicals were used exclusively in the South, which we were allegedly “saving”

from “aggression” from the North.) In any case, this murderous behavior killed vast numbers but also made any Vietnamese previously harboring doubts about the ongoing struggle extremely hostile to the United States and its local puppets. We had mastered the art of creating enemies.

This was based in part on the triumph of technological warfare and its ability to reduce U.S. casualties, while at the same time greatly increasing the casualties of the civilian population. U.S. casualties had a political cost—Vietnamese civilian casualties didn’t, and we didn’t count them then and continue to try hard to avoid counting them in Iraq, or Afghanistan. These are “unworthy” victims, “unpeople,” *untermenschen*—in Vietnam, “gooks”—and as Chomsky has pointed out the number of them we killed in Indochina isn’t even known within the range of millions. But the death machine ran on in part because of this great capacity to replenish enemy forces by the murderous and anti-civilian features of its operations.

The same is true in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the resistance grew in very close parallel with the U.S. occupation and its policies, which included that familiar heavy use of high-powered death-dealing weapons, numerous raids and home invasions that involved ruthless treatment of the “sand niggers” and “haji,” with many of them carted off to prison based on no serious derogatory information even on occupation principles, and a general lack of respect for the locals. The Iraqis would not have liked a foreign occupation in any case, but the U.S. policies of merciless killing, brutal treatment and racial contempt did a remarkable job of rapidly producing a major and effective resistance.

In Afghanistan as well we read on an almost daily basis of civilians killed in air-raids, most recently that there were 47 killed at a wedding party. The Serbs kill 40 at Racak in January 1999—all of them probably KLA fighters—and Louise Arbour at the Yugoslav Tribunal gets hysterical with humanistic passion and a war looms in the face of this atrocity—but the USAF kills 47 civilians at one crack in Afghanistan and the world yawns and the Enlightened States and Barack Obama plan to send more troops to help the killers. But in Afghanistan as in Iraq and Vietnam, the mastery of the art of generating oppositional fighters is truly impressive.

The U.S. Exit Date from Iraq as An Aspirational Time Horizon

The Bush administration has long been criticized for its misplanning in Iraq, including among other things its failure to have an exit program. It rarely occurred to people who made this criticism that the reason for that lack of an exit program was that the Bush administration didn’t intend to exit. They expected to install a client regime, perhaps managed by Chalabi, or later Allawi, with whom they would fix a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that would permit those “enduring bases” to endure indefinitely, and that would negotiate a new oil law that would denationalize and/or open up Iraq’s oil to U.S. and perhaps a few other allied oil companies. Thus from the very beginning of the occupation there were vague promises of an exit, but always quite vague and conditional on a “stability” that kept diminishing and whose definition always remained in the hands of the occupying power.

The problem of achieving those major objectives has always been awkward, given that the nominal U.S. aim—following the collapse of the more marketable (Wolfowitz) “getting rid of Saddam’s WMD” objective—is allegedly liberation and democracy, and given the painful fact that a substantial majority of Iraqis has regularly supported an end to the U.S. occupation,

many considering the occupation the main source of violence. Of course some in the West, like Tony Blair, have claimed that there is *no* occupation—the U.S.-U.K. troops are there at the invitation of the elected government of Iraq. It is amusing to see how such nonsense can be proclaimed without eliciting loud guffaws—how the mainstream media can treat governments installed by the occupation of a hostile or target government (Cambodia by Vietnam, Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, Lebanon’s by Syria) as obvious puppets of the occupation, whereas a government installed under a U.S.-U.K. occupation is declared independent, even while it is treated cavalierly and managed like any other puppet.

A compelling demonstration of the puppet status of the Maliki government was provided in the “Declaration of Principles for Long-Term Relationship of Cooperation and Friendship Between the Republic of Iraq and the United States of America,” signed by Bush and Maliki on November 26, 2007 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071126-11.html>). This Declaration was agreed upon by “two fully sovereign and independent states,” even if one had invaded, occupied, and continues to occupy the other; and it expresses the firm belief of both parties in “non-intervention in internal affairs [and] rejection of the use of violence in resolving disputes,” although the agreement followed the U.S.’s intervention in the internal affairs of Iraq and use of extreme violence after rejecting the ongoing work of diplomacy, and the continued dependence on violent intervention in Iraq to achieve U.S. objectives. The Principles are said to be “the expression of the will of the Iraqi people,” though that people has for years, and by large majorities, called for the exit of U.S. armed forces, a position supported by a majority of the Iraqi Parliament, and though the Iraqi people have not been allowed to vote on this set of Principles.

“The Economic Sphere” covered in this Declaration of Principles stresses “aiding its [Iraq’s] transition to a market economy,” an objective we know is held by the U.S. establishment, and had been imposed on Iraq by the U.S. proconsul Bremer (in violation of international law), but which we have no reason to believe represents the desires of the “Iraqi people.” It calls for integrating Iraq into the international financial system, and encouraging foreign investment in Iraq, “especially American investment, to contribute to the reconstruction and rebuilding of Iraq.” You may be quite sure it does not call for reparations from the invader and destroyer of so much of Iraqi infrastructure and the bringing to justice of its leaders.

In “The Security Sphere” the Declaration calls for helping Iraq “deter foreign aggression...that violates its sovereignty,” six years too late to help Iraq defend its sovereignty against U.S.-U.K. aggression. It also calls on Iraq to ask the UN Security Council to renew for one more term the occupation rights of the invader of 2003, and for Iraq to begin bilateral negotiations with the invader-occupier to achieve an agreement between these two sovereign governments in the “political, cultural, economic and security spheres” before July 31, 2008. In short, this is a model set of principles agreed to by a puppet and its master, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the “will of the Iraqi people.”

In the months leading up to that deadline of July 31, 2008, there was much activity on the part of the two sovereign governments in trying to reach an agreement that was basically a project of firming up occupation rights by getting Maliki to sign an SOFA that would recognize a U.S. military presence and base rights for a long and indeterminate period, along with a further effort to open up Iraq to foreign oil company occupation. This called for some fancy footwork and propaganda on the part of the two parties, and has had its comical features. On Bush’s side, he had to show what a gracious man he was and how that tough-bargaining Maliki had forced him to accept an “Iraq timeline”—to “a general time horizon for

meeting aspirational goals such as the resumption of Iraqi security control in their cities and provinces and the further reduction of U.S. combat forces from Iraq.” (Quoted in NYT, July 19, 2008) This actually constitutes a regression from the vague promises of 2003 and is something Orwell could have written for a Big Brother occupation. In fact, “general time horizon” and “aspirational goals” would seem like leg-pulling by a jokester—horizons recede; aspirations are mere hopes, and the aggressor-occupier seems to be laughing at the puppet.

But then Maliki gets tough and drops the “bombshell” that he will seek a more limited accord with the United States that includes a timetable for U.S. withdrawal.(Robert Dreyfus, “Maliki Stunner: He Wants US Pullout Timetable,” The Dreyfus Report, The Nation, July 7, 2008: <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/334991>). But this stunner comes late, long after Maliki had signed the Declaration of Principles, and at a time when he is being subjected to harsh internal Iraqi criticism for his puppet-like behavior and needs to give some evidence of independence from the occupier. It is absolutely standard behavior for puppets to assail their patrons for disrespect and for policy differences, although it is also standard for their reservations to be quietly set aside after the initial spate of publicity. General Nguyen Van Thieu in Vietnam, who like Maliki couldn’t have survived for a week without U.S. funding and military protection, often denounced his protectors. These puppet assaults sometimes yield a momentary stalemate, but there is always reason to believe that a puppet will eventually give way..

On the oil front, in late June the papers featured the announcement of the Iraqi oil minister Mohamad Sharastani that contracts had been drawn up between the Maliki government and five major Western oil companies to develop some of the largest fields in Iraq. No competitive bidding was allowed, and the terms announced were very poor by existing international contract standards. The contracts were written with the help of “a group of American advisers led by a small State department team.” This was all in conformity with the Declaration of Principles of November 26, 2007, whereby the “sovereign country” of Iraq would use “especially American investments” in its attempt to recover from the effects of the American aggression. The contracts have not yet been signed, and the internal protests are loud, but clearly the fig leaf of WMD and democracy has been stripped away as an “enduring” occupation and a systematic looting of Iraq’s oil are arranged under a non-democratic tool of the occupation.

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