

Iraq: Ending the War Without End

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The three participants in the third U.S. presidential debate last week pretended Iraq didn't exist, but if you go to a rally of supporters for either candidate it's the top issue talked about. Baghdad, a city in ruins, divided into ethnically cleansed fiefdoms of rubble, rats, and open sewage, a place where one risks death by walking outside, is managing major rallies of tens of thousands of people in opposition to the treaty to extend the occupation for three more years (and beyond) that is being negotiated by Bush and Maliki. And yet, the U.S. peace movement is largely hibernating until the November 4th U.S. elections, and the U.S. Congress remains almost entirely comatose.

To a consumer of U.S. corporate media this makes some sense. The occupation is for the benefit of the people of Iraq and, with the help of "the surge", it is "succeeding." President Bush is actually working on an "agreement" to "end" the "war." Peace activists should be celebrating, right?

To begin the reeducation process necessary to recognize such positions as sick jokes, I recommend the best history of the U.S. occupation of Iraq that I've seen: Michael Schwartz's "War Without End: The Iraq War in Context." This book puts incidents of violence we hear about in the context of the massive violence we don't hear much about, and puts all of it in the context of the economic and social devastation imposed on Iraq by the people we absurdly call our public servants. Schwartz also helps to make the complex clearer and simpler by framing his account in terms of the actual oily motivations of our government, rather than any of the pretended rationales.

Iraq was to be a brief stop on the march of U.S. empire into other Middle Eastern nations. But Iraq was not to be invaded and then allowed to recover in its previous form; it was to be completely remade as a totally privatized participant in the global economy. Of course, these two ideas were incompatible and resulted in the occupiers' attempt to accomplish in days what would have had to take decades in order to succeed at all even on its own terms. And massive additions of U.S. troops even early on would only have slowed the process of economically driven resistance. "The cycle of protest, repression, and escalation," Schwartz convincingly argues, "would have eventually run its course."

The resistance grew out of U.S. actions that destroyed the Iraqi economy and infrastructure and prevented their restoration, actions sometimes aimed at creating a neocon paradise of trickle-down success, and sometimes aimed more successfully at destruction and mass punishment. And yet, most of the violence has never come from the resistance. It comes from the U.S. occupiers. The assault on Fallujah was an assault on a relatively peaceful city aimed at wresting control of it from opponents of the occupation, not at pacifying any violence. U.S. assaults on civilians are, by and large, not collateral damage, but the intentional sending of a message to other civilians not to aid the resistance. And the various

acts of handing sovereignty over to Iraqis have never been understood by most Iraqis as anything more than laughable pretenses.

Most of Iraq is controlled by Sunni or Shia militias. The U.S. military and the puppet Iraqi government control very little. The U.S. military has negotiated cease-fires with Shia and Sunni groups, reducing violence but adding to the groups' consolidation of local power, power that will be increasingly used to demand major public economic projects of exactly the sort that the U.S. government refuses to provide, either in Iraq or in the United States. Yes, many are dead and many more have been driven from their homes, and still many, many more are weakened and injured. And yet, there is every indication that the resistance will be growing, not diminishing.

It is in this context that we should view the current attempt by Bush to legitimize and extend the occupation, his releasing last week of yet another unconstitutional "signing statement" giving himself the power to spend funds to control Iraq's oil, and his efforts to unconstitutionally create a treaty with Iraq, without Senate approval. If the treaty is put into place and accepted by the Iraqi Parliament and ignored by a spineless Congress, it will sanction three more years of occupation (to be followed by endless years of reduced-size occupation) but require "ending" (meaning reducing) the occupation by 2011. It will also technically take immunity from Iraqi law away from US troops and mercenaries in limited circumstances when off base and off duty, although the likelihood of actual prosecutions seems limited. Oh, and we will have established that a president can make treaties without even going through the pretense that Congress still exists.

A handful of Congress Members, led as always by Kucinich, are speaking out. And it is entirely possible that a bipartisan coalition of the sort that temporarily opposed Paulson's Plunder will coalesce in Congress: some opposing the treaty because it subjects American criminals to the rule of law in Iraq, others because it is a treaty created without Senate approval thus putting another nail in the coffin of Congress, and still others because it sanctions three more years of killing and dying and the impoverishment — on different scales — of the people of both nations. And yet, in very rare cases can this opposition in Congress be expected to amount to anything more than rhetoric, at least not without massive pressure from us — yes, you and me.

If the treaty is rejected, the occupation will lose its United Nations fig leaf of legality on January 1st, and the general consensus is that all troops and mercenaries will be kept on bases. We will have the opportunity then of pointing out the resulting reduction in violence, of insisting on the rule of law, and of demanding the immediate withdrawal of every man and woman serving in Iraq as occupiers.

We need members of Congress to demand publication of the treaty in English and Arabic, hold public hearings, and insist on the Senate's right to ratify or reject all treaties. Yes, I know that we can usually count on the Iraqi Parliament to represent us better than our own Congress, and yes, I know, there is a U.S. election next month, but that just makes two particular senators especially important to lobby. No election can stop you from sending Obama, McCain, and every other member of Congress a note like this one, or calling them on the phone, or visiting them in person with this message:

Dear _____ (member of Congress)

I am aware that President Bush is currently in the process of unconstitutionally making a treaty (misleadingly called a Status of Forces Agreement or SOFA) with Iraq without Senate approval. I am writing to ask you to insist that this treaty be published in English and Arabic, that public hearings be held on the matter, and that the Senate reserve the right to ratify or reject the treaty.

Should this so-called SOFA be enacted without Congressional approval, it will establish that a president can make treaties without Congress, which, as you know, is unconstitutional.

As my representative, it is your fundamental duty to ensure that the Constitution of the United States of America is respected and upheld.

If you and your colleagues in Congress choose to ignore this matter and the SOFA is put into place and accepted by the Iraqi Parliament, there will be three more years of occupation followed by many more years of what will amount to a reduced-size occupation.

A majority of American people has already made it abundantly clear that we want the U.S. out of Iraq as soon as possible.

I strongly urge you to do everything you can to carry out our wishes.

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