

The Election In Iraq: The U.S. Propaganda System Is Still Working In High Gear

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The Earlier Demonstration Elections

In our 1984 book *Demonstration Elections: U.S.-Staged Elections In The Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and El Salvador*, Frank Brodhead and I stressed that such elections were mainly designed to placate (and mislead) the home population of the United States rather than to decide anything important in the countries in which the election was held. In each of the earlier cases the election did help consolidate the power of the U.S.-chosen leaders, but its most important function was to demonstrate to the U.S. public that we were on the right track in the occupied countries, helping them on the road to democracy. The fact that the peoples there came out and voted was interpreted as proof that they approved our occupation and wanted us to stay and finish the job. And in Vietnam and El Salvador the United States stayed on and managed a great deal more destruction and killings.

We also called attention to the fact that there was a sharp difference between what the voters allegedly wanted out of the election and what they got. In both Vietnam and El Salvador the public was reportedly eager for peace, according to U.S. news reports. However, the point of those elections was to strengthen the authority of political elements that were completely geared to further war, in accord with U.S. official demands, and further war is what ensued. Thus the elections yielded a result in contradiction to the apparent goals of the voters.

Another theme of the book was the failure of those demonstration elections to meet accepted standards that make elections truly free, including: freedom of assembly, speech, and press; the right to organize intermediate bodies like unions and political associations; the ability of candidates of all political complexion to enter their slates and compete; and the absence of state terror that might coerce voters into voting or voting for particular candidates. None of these conditions were met in the earlier demonstration elections.

A further theme was the calculated use of voter turnout as a measure of approval of the election and occupation itself, with the opposition of rebels serving as the dramatic counterpart of the contest. If people voted despite that rebel opposition it supposedly demonstrated the populace's support of the official candidates—and of the occupation—and rejection of any opposition. We noted that this formula was not used in the case of the Polish election of 1947 sponsored by the Soviet Union; there the high turnout was cited as proof of coercion. There, the 170,000 Soviet-trained security police on hand was in itself considered to rule out the possibility of a free election. The Nicaraguan election of 1984 yielded a fine turnout for the Sandinistas, but here too, despite the contra opposition to the election, the turnout was not interpreted as demonstrating popular support of the Sandinista

government, which was undergoing attack and destabilization by the Reagan administration.

The U.S. media's treatment of those earlier demonstration elections was perfect as service to the election's U.S. organizers, and the perfection of this service was further exhibited in the media's refusal to apply the same criteria of evaluation to the Nicaraguan election of 1984 (see Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, pp. 116-137, for details on this amusing but gross double standard) . For each of their own government's demonstration elections the media featured turnout as proving something important. In the case of Vietnam, the standard formula employed throughout the media ran: "Despite attempts by the Vietcong to intimidate them, South Vietnamese voters turned out in large numbers" (NYT, Sept. 11, 1967), which "surprised and heartened" U.S. officials (NYT, Sept. 4, 1967); and another article featured officials saying "U.S. Aides Foresee Saigon Peace Step as a Result of Vote" (NYT, Sept. 6, 1967). The New York Times and media in general never allowed awkward facts, such as a brutal military occupation, the absence of freedoms of speech, assembly, or organization, and that virtually all authorities agreed that the "Vietcong," which was not on the ballot, had more indigenous support than the U.S.-appointed leaders, to cause them to call the election a farce and a "sham" (as the New York Times called the vastly superior Nicaraguan election of 1984). And while the media reported the public's desire for peace, they uniformly failed to point out before, during or after the election that it was clearing the ground for war, and of course they never suggested that this might be its very purpose.

This model of apologetics was closely followed in the Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984, where turnout was featured and made a triumph, the failure to meet any of the conditions of a free election considered not worth mentioning, and the purpose—preparing the ground for further warfare—was misrepresented, and the resultant escalation of violence never related to the election triumph. As for dealing with military rule and ongoing state terror, the New York Times was satisfied that the murderous Salvadoran army, which had been killing an average of 800 civilians a month in the year before the 1982 election, "has pledged to protect voters from violence and to respect the outcome of the contest" (Warren Hoge, NYT, March 27, 1982). The paper editorialized that "despite the guerilla death threats...an impressive majority of eligible voters...went to the polls" in El Salvador's "freest election in 50 years....The Salvadoran turnout marks a significant achievement," never mentioning that voting was obligatory and the failure to vote dangerous. ("Democracy's Hope in Central America," NYT, March 30, 1982). The editors referred to "a boycott by left-wing parties," when in fact all the leaders of those parties were on an army death list. The editorial statement that "American support for the outgoing right-centrist junta was always contingent on political pluralism and land reform" was a blatant lie; neither of these were on the U.S. or junta agenda. The only requirement for support was an agreement to fight on, as in Vietnam, a point never acknowledged by the editorialists.

The Iraq Demonstration Election

The similarities of the media treatment of those earlier demonstration election to their performance on the January 30, 2005 Iraq election have been close, with only minor differences reflecting altered circumstances. Once again the media have played the turnout card, in line with the official public relations agenda, with the Iraqi public defying the insurgents and the U.S. military playing a pro-democracy role in protecting the election, just as the Salvadoran army did in the Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984. This makes the election a success and a vindication of U.S. policy, as the election was organized by the

United States and opposed by the insurgents; and for the media elections are inherently good if carried out under proper auspices (that is, by the current Bush administration, or in El Salvador by the Reagan administration, or in Russia in 1996 when Boris Yeltsin was favored, by Yeltsin with the support of the Clinton administration—as opposed to the election under Sandinista auspices in Nicaragua in 1984).

Once again the media do not discuss whether the conditions of a free election have been met, and whether a genuine free election can be held under a military occupation and in the midst of violent warfare. They were sure that the Soviet occupation of Poland in 1947 precluded a free election and they were doubtful it could be free under Sandinista rule in 1984 with that government's "pugnacity" and "awesome monopoly of force" (Time). But the U.S. army in Iraq is seen only as protecting the election, not in any way influencing its outcome, which is the official and patriotic view and reflects a durable double standard (e.g., Ken Dilanian, "U.S. troops: after laying groundwork, a cautious step back," Philadelphia Inquirer, Jan. 31, 2005).

The media did not discuss the fact that Al-Jazeera had been barred from Baghdad, that other independent media were regularly harassed, and that the U.S.-appointed interim government completely dominates television, although the media were very upset at the Sandinistas' restrictions on the newspaper La Prensa in 1984 and implied that this badly compromised the election held there. The freedom of speech and assembly in Iraq, and the ability of candidates to campaign, were very much limited by the U.S.-insurgents war, and a large fraction of the candidates never campaigned and never even had their names listed. These disabilities were felt least by the U.S.-appointed leadership and bureaucracy, who had media access and protection by the security forces. The freedom to organize and build intermediate groups was also limited by the violence, and by the occupation authority's hostility to labor organizations. Thus the "civil institutions that make an election meaningful" were in short supply (Brian Whitaker, "Fig-leaf freedom," Guardian, Jan. 31, 2005). The media focused on the Iraqi insurgents pressures against voting, but they failed to mention the pressures to vote, including (as in Fallujah) the setting up of polling stations at centers that distribute food, water and money to refugees, and the reported tie-in of voter registration and voting itself with the receipt of monthly food rations (see Dahr Jamail, "[Some Just Voted for Food](#)," [Inter Press Service](#) ; also, Michel Chossudovsky, "[Iraqi Elections: Media Disinformation on Voter Turnout?](#)") According to veteran journalist and Mexico specialist, John Ross, "making food giveaway programs contingent on delivering votes is a pillar of Mexico's corrupted electoral system," and he notes that two Mexican Federal Electoral Institute commissioners had been dispatched to Baghdad to give expert advice there ("Hecho en Mexico: the Iraqi Election: Fox Helps Bush Craft Bloody Electoral Farce," Feb. 9, 2005). Perhaps most important, the media have not discussed how a military occupation (and war of pacification) shapes an election's meaning and process. The occupation is the dominant military force in Iraq, with 150,000 service personnel, 20,000 private "security" contractors, a massive budget (some \$50 billion a year in military costs), and with four permanent military bases already in place and ten more planned (see Christine Spolar, "14 'enduring bases' set in Iraq," Chicago Tribune, March 23, 2004). The U.S. Embassy is the most powerful political institution in Iraq, shaping the Iraqi official structures and bureaucracy by orders, personnel choices among Iraqis and those seconded from the U.S. government and elsewhere, and controlling the national budget—both the oil sales revenues and reconstruction and other funds allocated to it by the U.S. administration. As Phyllis Bennis has pointed out, the \$16 billion in U.S. taxpayer's money not spent on the reconstruction effort, and the U.S. military budget, "will become a potential slush fund for

the new assembly's favored projects" ("UFPJ Talking Points #29: Reading the Election in Iraq," Feb. 1, 2005)

U.S. pro-consul Paul Bremer handed down 100 or more rules with the force of law that have affected the economy by imposing low tax rates, opening the door to trade and investment, and privatizing segments of state-owned property, in violation of international law, but creating a new structure of vested interests in continued U.S. domination. The occupation has reorganized the Iraqi government and bureaucracy, chosen judges, installed 24 ministers, and placed advisers with multi-year contracts in these ministries, again giving the occupation and its political agents economic power and leverage. It has issued Transitional Administrative Laws that will control Iraq governance while the transitional National Assembly operates and into the period following a presidential election. These laws severely limit the decision capability of the National Assembly, thus making the occupation's rules and chosen officials the government, not the newly elected assembly, and along with the financial resources and unified direction of the occupation the occupation authorities will have an edge in any bargaining over future major appointments and legislation in the fragmented Assembly.

This military, political and financial power held by the invader must surely have affected the election at many levels, including election issues, effective candidacy, the positions taken by candidates, and the consequent limits in the policy outcomes of the election. This might not be so if the United States was truly neutral, with no stake in the outcome, no policies it wished implemented, and no differential treatment of candidates. In a remarkable illustration of internalized acceptance of the premises of a propaganda system, the U.S. mainstream media do take the United States as neutral, essentially ignoring the U.S. power position and goals in Iraq as factors that might shape the election and cause its results to accord with U.S. interests. As with the media of a well-managed totalitarian system, the U.S. media take as a premise the benevolent intent of their leadership, and as its alleged goals have shifted—in this case from "security" and eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to liberation—so has the media's premise regarding U.S. goals.

Honest, objective, and non-ideological analysis of the Iraq election would have featured heavily the Bush administration's aims in Iraq, how it strove to realize those aims, and how the election fits into Bush plans. It would have discussed in detail how the occupation and its policies might make it possible for Bush aims to be realized through an electoral process that seems—like the earlier grant of "sovereignty" seemed—to relinquish final authority to Iraqis. The Bush administration's leaders made it clear in published documents that their aim in attacking Iraq would be to project power in the Middle East, which would include the establishment of military bases there and gaining assured "access" to Iraqi oil, goals that called for a client, not a democratic, regime. This is why the administration pushed for Chalabi rule and fought against one-person one-vote elections for many months, and used the interlude till the January 30th election to work around the election threat to U.S. domination.

You will look in vain for a media analysis of the pre-invasion Bush objectives, which should have been a prelude to any discussion of the election itself as essential context. You will look in vain for any analysis of possible hidden motives behind the Bush support of the election, and how we might reconcile the apparent contradiction between support of a supposedly democratic election and the Bush administration's oil and base control objectives. Michael Wines writes that threats to a "functioning Iraqi democracy" are

“legion,” and he names them: “insurgency; a once-dominant Sunni minority that resisted the election; a now-powerful Shiite majority that remembers oppression; neighbors like Syria and Iran with reasons to sabotage democracy, and more” (“Democracy Has to Start Somewhere,” NYT, Feb. 6, 2005). But the United States is not included, despite its known pre-election goals, the character of the Bush administration, the oft-mentioned fear of Shiite majority rule producing an Islamic state allied with Iran, and the numerous U.S. actions in Iraq incompatible with self-rule. The propaganda premise and ideology are fully internalized by Michael Wines.

As to the meaning of the Iraq election turnout and vote, the media do not discuss how issues are distorted in a military occupation by the fact that the occupation itself becomes a major bone of contention. Some won’t vote because it would seem to approve the occupation, and non-voters outnumbered those who did vote. Others vote because while they oppose the occupation they hope a successful election will get the invader out faster than otherwise; still others vote in the hope that getting the election out of the way will somehow bring with it more security and stability. Some voted because of fears of loss of ration cards; still others voted because their religious leaders instructed them to vote.

The invasion-occupation may be the prime cause of insecurity and instability, but the occupation authorities and their agents, and the media, present the occupiers as the solution to occupation-generated violence. And since the occupiers dominate the flow of information as well as the means of violence their claim strikes many as plausible. As James Carroll notes, “The irony is exquisite. The worse the violence gets, the longer the Americans will claim the right to stay.... Full blown civil war, if it comes to that, will serve Bush’s purpose too” (“Train Wreck of an Election,” Boston Globe, Feb. 1, 2005). In short, the occupation itself profoundly influences the election both directly as a result of occupation authority’s actions and power, and by its indirect affect of making the occupation itself a crucial but confusing election issue. Polls show that a clear majority of Iraqis oppose the occupation and want the United States to leave quickly—a Coalition Provisional Authority-sponsored poll in May 2004 showed that 92 percent of Iraqis viewed the invaders as “occupiers” rather than “liberators”; 85 percent wanted them to leave as soon as possible, 41 percent immediately—but no candidate ran on an end-the-occupation ticket or put that goal on his or her priority agenda. (Both the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the dominant Shiite party grouping, and Allawi’s party, at first included a demand for ending the occupation as part of their platform, but withdrew it, presumably under U.S. pressure.) What the individual candidates and even the various groupings on the ballot stood for was not very clear, as the names of many candidates were not even disclosed (the UIA named only 37 of their 225 candidates), and there was hardly any serious campaigning and debate over the issues. But many of the candidates are beholden to the occupation and may be prepared to give it a lengthy stay. Voters may be in for some unpleasant surprises, especially the large number who voted in the belief that the National Assembly will end the occupation.

A special feature of the Iraq election has been the support given it by top Shia leaders, who hope to be able to use it to convert their numerical majority into political authority. This gave the election an element of democratic authenticity or democratic potential which may or may not be realized. It should be recognized that the Bush administration strove desperately to avoid this situation, rejecting a one-person one-vote election from the start in favor of a U.S.-appointed Governing Council, then an interim government of U.S. choice and long-lagged popular election only under the pressures of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the major Shiite parties—and a failing policy. As Juan Cole points out, “if it had been up to Bush,

Iraq would have been a soft dictatorship under Chalabi, or would have had stage-managed elections with an electorate consisting of a handful of pro-America notables" ("[A Mixed Story](#) ," Informed Comment, Jan. 30, 2005).

But in belatedly giving way and agreeing to the January 30th election in the midst of a growing Sunni-based insurgency, the Bush administration effectively shifted the character of the conflict from a fight against the occupation to a civil war between Sunni and Shiites with the occupation aligned with the Shiites. This splintering tactic and the entire electoral process may have strengthened the administration's position in Iraq, not only by giving it that seeming democratic imprimatur, but also by bringing together the occupation and Shiites in a pragmatic alliance that enhances the prospect of the achievement of Bush administration goals.

The New York Times writes that in the election, "in an open expression of popular will—Iraqis have expressed their clear preference that these battles be fought exclusively in the peaceful, constitutional arena" (editorial, "Message From Iraq," NYT, Jan. 31, 2005). This alleged clear preference is not at all clear: as noted earlier a majority failed to vote at all, and many may have voted in the hopes that this would expedite the exit of the invaders, while still believing that the invaders might have to be thrown out. Many voted on the instruction of Sistani that voting was a religious duty; and some may even have voted hoping that the occupation and killing would continue as their jobs depended on this.

But the deeper dishonesty of this editorial statement is this: it ignores the fact that the "battles" have occurred because the Bush administration invaded Iraq in violation of international law and has committed massive crimes there, stoking a resistance. The invaders, having taken over the state and in command of military power and the machinery of state by illegal force and violence, are now prepared to rule mainly through "peaceful, constitutional" means, defined, organized and protected by themselves. So the insurgents should stop fighting and let the invader run the show, by means of his forcibly imposed rules, bureaucrats, judges, and money (a good part of it stolen from the proceeds of Iraq oil sales), with the U.S. army as "protector" of this "constitutional" regime. Would Pravda have had the nerve to write something this brazen about Czechoslovakia in 1968 or Afghanistan under Soviet proxy rule?

As the media have portrayed the election as a triumph for the Bush administration, and therefore a partial vindication of the aggression-occupation, as in the case of the earlier Vietnamese and Salvadoran elections this will give the administration a freer hand. Given the administration's initial objectives it seems reasonable to expect that it will do two things: First it will intensify the pacification-by-violence program to marginalize the insurgency and clear the ground for rule by groups chosen by or deeply indebted to the invader-occupier. As Seymour Hersh has pointed out, the administration has already steadily escalated its bombing raids month by month, making all of Iraq into a "free fire zone"—"It's simply a turkey shoot...Hit everything, kill everything"—virtually unreported in the media; and we may surely anticipate more of the same ("[We've Been Taken Over By a Cult](#) ," CounterPunch, Jan. 27, 2005).

Second, the administration will try to bolster the political position of its chosen and preferred agents and neutralize any Shia threat (a possible Islamic state; insistence on a U.S. withdrawal) by deals, bribes, and threats. The Shia are already indebted to the administration for removing Saddam, currently trying to crush a Sunni-based resistance, and agreeing to an election in which Shia voting power will give them nominal power. They may

be willing to strike a deal—and a deal may already have been struck– in which a dollop of substantive power is granted in exchange for concessions that make for limited client state status.

This all seems more likely given the fact that an important member and candidate of a leading Shiite Party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, and current Iraqi Finance Minister, Abdel Mahdi, announced at a press conference in Washington on December 22, 2004 that “Iraq” wants to open up its oil industry to private investment. Mahdi is a leading candidate for Prime Minister. With a man like this in power the Bush administration would be well on its way to achieving its strategic objectives of controlling Iraq’s oil reserves and maintaining at least some military bases in the country.

So with media assistance the election may have helped enable the Bush administration to fight the insurgency more aggressively for an extended period; and by domination of a technically flawed election built on an unlevel playing field, by taking advantage of the various modes of power available to the occupation (rules, agents within the government, vast sums of money), and by means of deals with Shia influentials, the election may facilitate the establishment of a parent-client relationship that will allow the achievement of major Bush aims. This all requires that the insurgency be brought under control without too great an expenditure of time, money and U.S. casualties, that the election-based deal-making and government are sufficiently accommodating, and that the Iraqi people will accept more pacification and political clienthood without widening and intensifying the resistance.

Some might argue that as the United States committed aggression in Iraq, built on a system of lies, and then proceeded to perform so poorly that a major insurgency ensued, that it ought to get out or be thrown out quickly, just as Saddam was thrown out of Kuwait in 1991. But we are dealing here with a superpower, whose aggression and occupation rights are even given sanction by the UN, IMF, and “international community.” As the officials of these governments and institutions, and others, applaud the election and ignore the occupation’s influence on its results we can hardly expect the media to do otherwise. Here, as in the past, the media provide what is now standard demonstration election apologetics: the media leopard never changes its spots.

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