Iraq: The Democrats to the Fore

written by Barry Finger | March 9, 2009

IN HIS BRILLIANT SATIRE of the plight of the Palestinians as a captured nation, Emile Habiby introduced Saeed, the ill fated pessoptimist. His beleaguered hero explained his inability to differentiate between optimism and pessimism in this way: "When I awake each morning I thank the Lord he did not take my soul at night. If harm befalls me during the day, I thank Him that it was no worse. So which am I, a pessimist or an optimist?" In an analogous way, the Democratic Party, choking in the grip of power politics, has in short order revealed itself the ill fated pranti-war party. The American military machine was able to topple the Baathist regime in short order, but American imperialism has been unable to pacify Iraq in the aftermath. Clearly, by the "metrics" that former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was so fond of employing, the war is lost. The American electorate understands this, and the Democratic base is fulminating to settle accounts with an administration seen as both electorally illegitimate and institutionally dishonest on an historical level that dwarfs the mendacity preceding the buildup to the Spanish American and Vietnam wars. The violence the occupation forces are supposed to be quelling has itself surged. Reconstruction has been an abject failure. The prison population has grown by a third since the Saddam era. More and more territory is out of the coalition's control. Instead of one big Saddam there are hundreds of little Saddams. Only 30 percent of Iraqi children can attend schools compared to the universal attendance under the old regime; and women's lives are ever more perilous since the ascendancy of religious sectarianism in Iraq's stormy political life. Millions have fled the country or been displaced. The medical system, once a source of pride in the Arab world, is in shambles. The sectarian and ethnocentric government of Iraq is ever more notoriously distinguished by its abject incompetency in every arena save self-enrichment. As one Iraqi socialist so frustratingly summarized, after a scant four years of the American led occupation, "a society that was more like any western society in living standards, security, education, and many other fields than its neighbors (was) pushed back . . . to the Stone Ages." Most ironic were it not so damning and tragic is the effect the Iraqi war has had in ratcheting up worldwide terrorism by sevenfold, according to figures derived from the MIPT-Rand Terrorism database. This irony is of course of a piece with most capitalist wars. The "war to end all wars," which was also the "war for democracy" resulted in more war with even greater carnage and even less democracy; the war to "stop fascism" culminated in a monstrous growth of totalitarianism. And so, the war against terrorism. American capitalism can marshal the public behind its imperial crusades only by appealing to some loftier ideal such as safeguarding the world from religious fanaticism by spreading democracy. American elites never, perish the thought, want "world domination," they merely seek the benefits of world power that accrue from setting the errant world aright. Theirs is always a reluctant "internationalism." This has all worn quite thin of late with the American public. Those politicians such as John McCain and the congressional delegation led recently by him to Baghdad, who remain true believers in this intervention, are increasingly marginalized within the court of public opinion as intellectual cousins to the flat earth society and cargo cults. No sooner had they returned with glowing reports of progress from their recent visit to a Potemkin village in Baghdad, than the media was besieged by tales of horror from Iraqi merchants now fearing that the American visit will serve only to make that isolated market a more tempting target for insurgent attacks. Neither has there exactly been a swarm of endorsement within the American establishment for Tommy Thompson's "generous" suggestion that the Iraqi people might perhaps be asked to deliver their opinion on whether American forces should stay. And for good reason. For as Steve Shalom and Gilbert Achcar recently pointed out in these pages, polls do exist and they reveal that not only do the preponderance of Iraqis wish us to leave, but a majority also endorse attacks on American and coalition military personnel. Then again, and on closer inspection, the good governor was really asking for the opinion of the Iraqi government as a surrogate for the

Iraqi people. This, one might think, could provide an easy propaganda victory for the administration insofar after all as the ongoing presence of American troops guarantees that government's security to loot the oil coffers and smuggle the country's wealth and cultural icons abroad in preparation for their future in exile. Yet here too, such judgments would be premature. For whatever slender authority the various Iraqi political parties still enjoy rests in part on their anti-occupation planks. The administration is clearly not willing to wager that there are enough troops in all of Iraq to safeguard party leaderships should they repudiate this fragile reed which still links them to their bases. Still democracy clearly comes in a distant second to economic neo-liberalism, though both avenues highlight in their own way the wholesale contempt the administration and its allies have for Iraqi concerns. Emblematic is the occupation's recently proposed "hydrocarbon law," which, were it to be enacted, would pave the way for international investors such as BP, Exxon and Shell to hive off 75 percent of that country's oil production revenues for the next thirty years. Given that the oil sector represents the overwhelming source of existing and foreseeable public revenues, and that only 17 of 80 oil fields are in current operation, it is clear that Iraq is to be looted from within and without. The concept of production sharing agreements, which underlies this law, dates back five years ago as part of the Bush State Department's policy-development project entitled "The Future of Iraq" and was later embedded in Bremer's reconstruction plan. It was conceived in English, translated into Arabic and formally confirmed by Maliki's cabinet in early 2007. The Iraqi General Union of Oil Employees has struggled against privatization plan and has taken an unequivocal stand against this legislation as well. In response to an earlier anti-privatization conference last summer and similar political activities, the occupation forces froze its bank accounts, arrested union members and terminated others from their jobs, a portent of the scale of repression that stands in the offing to all forms of resistance that seek to fuse the interests of class and nation. Of this, of course, there's been nary a peep from the Democratic Party leadership. To the extent that they engage at all with the Iraqi public, it is to issue warnings and admonitions about the American public's limited patience with their behavior. The Democrats are no more capable of imperial self-recrimination than their Republican rivals. It is not the United States that is to be condemned as an aggressor, insofar as an aggressor by any reasonable definition is one who seizes and rules another people's territory without provocation and against the expressed wishes of that people. Aggression committed by itself or its allies is never aggression. American foreign policy may be indicted only for being badly mishandled and poorly crafted, but it is always the United States which is seen in the eyes of the Democratic leadership as being the principal victim of the Republican debacle. Their populism may flirt with the idealism of its progressive base, but always with a knowing wink to American chauvinism. It is not the ongoing project of imperial intervention, including the Clinton era sanctions, that stripped Iraq of every bond of social solidarity down to the most primitive ties of blood and faith. It's not the divide and conquer tactics of the occupiers that brought a viciously cruel version of Islamic fundamentalism to the fore. No, these age old rivalries were always "just below the surface." From the heights of Olympian disdain and regal arrogance, Joe Biden for one, would simply allow "history" to reassert itself and let Iraq disintegrate as a nation into its three large religious and subnational constituencies. All of which brings us to the most current episode of disgraceful behavior on the part of the Democratic Party — the Supplemental spending bill, otherwise known as the "Iraqi Accountability Act." Ostensibly, both the House and the Senate versions of the bill would set definite deadlines for the withdrawal of troops. The Senate bill would require withdrawal to be complete by March 2008; the House version would have it complete by August 2008. Both ostensibly ban torture. Both detail limits on how many days a soldier or marine may be kept in Iraq. The Pelosi bill demands of the president that he report on progress made in Iraq. All very commendable, very responsive. And as Retired Brigadier General Kevin Ryan argued, it is also very misleading. For the House and Senate bills also permit troops to remain in Iraq "as long as they are performing one of three specific missions: protecting US facilities, citizens, or forces; combating Al Qaeda or international terrorists and training Iraqi security forces." Altogether the number of brigades needed to perform these missions could reach between 12 and 20, which is a

particularly curious "withdrawal." Particularly curious because it permits roughly the same number of troops to remain after the deadline as there have been for the past three years. It moreover studiously avoids calling for the dismantling of permanent military bases or identifying withdrawal with actually bringing troops home rather than merely redeploying them to nearby countries in the region. It allows the president to be the sole arbiter as to whether Congressional benchmarks have been attained. It appropriates all the funds the president requested for prosecuting the war. And it does absolutely nothing to block and forbid spreading the war to Iran. The ban on torture, redundant — one might naively think — in any case given that the United States is a signatory to numerous international treaties that outlaw torture, and limitations on the length of tour duties are both eyewash, because both had already been tried by a Republican congress and simply nullified through presidential signing statements which announced the administration's intent to ignore and break the law. But rather than threatening that any future signal to abrogate the law would be met with the counter-threat of impeachment, the House bill permits the president to simply waive restrictions on tour duty limitations which is exactly what he has done. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, carefully cobbled to avoid any confrontation with the administration, which is a telling indication as to just how zealously the Democrats can also be expected to investigate and punish acts of governmentally sanctioned torture. And both bills, congressional and senatorial, *require* the Iraqi Parliament to pass its "hydrocarbon law," ostensibly touted to the American and Iraqi publics as a means of equitably(!) sharing the (remaining) oil revenues among the various Iraqi regions. But by compelling Iraq to engineer and legitimate the foreign capture of its own oil, the Democratic party lends its authority to an act of brigandage that would reverberate throughout the region. Representative Sam Farr explained, as if scripted by the late Habiby, the pranti-war soul of the Democrats. "This bill," he stated, " brings our troops home." But he also told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "They want to go gung-ho. They want to escalate in Iraq. So what would our 'no' votes mean?" Hillary Clinton, the scourge of the anti-war wing and Barack Obama, its rising star, agree in foreseeing, despite all that fashionable withdrawal rhetoric, "a remaining military as well as political mission" in Iraq for some time to come. So the question remains: why, rather than refusing to take any moral or political responsibility for this fiasco, are the Democrats pleading in effect for co-ownership? Why instead of supporting the Iraqi working class are they once again cutting the floor from underneath it? And why, rather than embracing this thinly veiled offer at collaboration, is the administration resisting the blandishments of the Democrats? The simple answer is that to pull out of Iraq is to show weakness. To pull out is to lose. To be seen as the ratifier of that loss would open the Democratic party to the charge that they are less committed to the defense of the same social system, institutions, programs and privileges of American capitalism than the Republicans. Democrats seek collaboration to avoid the taint of irresoluteness in defense of elite interests, while Republicans seek to hang this failure in its final throes wholly on the next, and presumably, Democratic administration to make sure they stay so branded for years to come. One of the chief illusions about American society and its political forms is the myth that the two party system represented by the Democrats and Republicans is rooted in different domestic and foreign policy principles. They are in fact rooted in different constituencies and rule by different means; the Democrats primarily and wherever possible through concessions, the Republicans through repression, either state or free market based. But the Democratic party as it is comprised is as committed to a foreign and domestic policy dictated by the interests of the corporate elite as their rivals. On foreign affairs this tactical difference concerns secondary issues such as more generous foreign aid, a more protracted approach to negotiations and containment or invoking the UN, NATO or regional allies as international cover rather than flying solo and in the teeth of world opprobrium. But the Democrats only pursue aims which are consistent with the preservation of capitalism — domestically through an ever watered down commitment to a bare-bones welfare state and internationally through bribery and big power intimidation. The Democrats are, in short, a company union rhetorically and nominally representing society's rank and file –including its anti-war constituency, but in actuality an instrument of its corporate financiers and power brokers. This is

what prevents them from formulating and implementing a fundamental or basic critique of the aims and purposes of American foreign policy. If the Democrats, nevertheless, eventually find their way to distancing themselves decisively from this war, it would be not for anti-imperialist reasons, but rather because the continuance of this utterly failed policy had finally proven an intolerable drag on U.S. global power. The Democratic Party has by default become the symbol of popular appeal to mass sections of the American population alienated and frustrated by this war. But the same reason the anti-war movement is attracted to the Democrats, that is because it is the only realistic, i.e., *capitalist* alternative, is why socialists cannot support it. We, that is those who share this outlook, are for a democratic foreign policy, which is precisely what the Democratic Party as it is so constituted is incapable of offering. It is not with glee that we see our general analysis of the Democrats fulfilled in its current shameful performance. That is why we urge those who do not share our perspective and do not see the Democratic Party as a dead end and debilitating trap for progressives to fight uncompromisingly for a real democratic foreign policy. Nor do we insist that only socialists, or those who agree in part with the socialist analysis of society are capable of championing a genuine democratic alternative. What we do believe is that only a party independent of the sway of capitalism is able to give priority to programs, proposals and actions that encourage and support the masses in every country to work and fight for their own emancipation. It is only a party with no organizational stakes or ideological commitments to the present structure of society that can also lend those independent forces in Iraq — its embattled trade union, feminist, socialist and democratic forces — the type of consistent support, free of the taint of imperialism, needed to restore that besieged nation, and similarly oppressed countries to national dignity and real democracy. And when, as we fully expect, the Democratic Party candidate for president in 2008 is once again someone who embraces bipartisan imperialism, we hope this betrayal might become a signal for progressive politicians and their supporters — those who fervently share our desire for a decisive break with the foreign policy status quo — to end their crippling loyalty to the Democrats and seek a new path.

Footnotes