

Questions for the Peace Movement: The U.S. Occupation of Iraq

May 27, 2010

This article is part of an ongoing discussion of the Iraq war and its aftermath. Various New Politics editors will be writing on this subject in future issues, not always with identical viewpoints, and we welcome contributions from our readers.

IN FEBRUARY 2003, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE in the United States and around the world protested the impending U.S.-led war on Iraq. But today, even among opponents of the war, there is widespread confusion on the question of the ongoing occupation. Many who opposed the war before it began now argue that "Yes, it was a mistake to go into Iraq in the first place, but now that we're there, we have to stay — it's our responsibility to ensure democracy to the Iraqi people and protect them from chaos and civil war, as well as to promote global peace and stability." Democratic presidential candidates Howard Dean and Carol Moseley Braun make this argument, and it is an approach shared by many nonpoliticians as well.

In my view, this line of reasoning is seriously flawed, and leads to disastrous consequences; it ignores the deeply destructive, reactionary and inhumane character of the American role in Iraq, and in the world. However, at the same time that the peace movement opposes war and the continued U.S. military presence in Iraq, it also needs to address the question of how to respond to ruthless dictators like Saddam Hussein, to terrorism and to Islamic political fundamentalism.

To clarify how to think about the occupation, it is useful to go back and review the different approaches within the peace movement before the United States declared war. Some, like the International Action Committee and ANSWER, absolutely refused to criticize Saddam Hussein, seeing him, as they had Slobodan Milosevic, as an antiimperialist leader to be defended, even celebrated. A friend of mine who went from New York to an antiwar demonstration in Washington, DC on an official ANSWER bus was horrified when, in a manner reminiscent of the Stalinists in the 1930s, the organizers treated the riders to a film which included, among other things, praise for Saddam Hussein's education system — presumed evidence that the benevolence of the government outweighed or compensated for any possible excesses. Fortunately, although ANSWER was and is very well organized and has sponsored several large antiwar demonstrations, it does not actually represent the outlook of most peace activists.

Another view was held by the many establishment critics of the Bush administration and substantial elements of the peace movement who argued against the war on "containment" grounds. Saddam Hussein could be successfully contained by sanctions, no-fly zones, inspections, and the threat of more outright military intervention if he didn't comply, so actual war was unnecessary and, if unilateral, especially unwise. There are basic problems with this approach: first, it accepted as a given Saddam Hussein's continuing hold on power and vicious repression of his people, and second, it left in place the various mechanisms of coercion, power and aggression of the United States, operating either directly, or indirectly through the United Nations Security Council.

Rather than accepting the status quo on both sides and trying to simply manage or contain it, there were those in the antiwar movement who argued that indeed there was a need for regime change in Iraq — and in dictatorial and repressive countries throughout the world — but that this change needed to be achieved by the people in those countries themselves, rather than by imperial power. The way people in the United States could encourage such change, these peace activists argued, was not through supporting military intervention, but by promoting change at home that could generate a radically new U.S. foreign policy, one capable of politically undermining rather than strengthening authoritarian governments and movements. For example, the Campaign for Peace and Democracy (of which I am a codirector, along with Thomas Harrison and Jennifer Scarlott) circulated a statement "We Oppose Both Saddam Hussein and the U.S. War on Iraq: A call for a new, democratic U.S. foreign policy" (www.cpdweb.org or see *New Politics*, no. 34, winter 2003, p. 16). This statement gained over 5000 signatures in the course of just a few weeks and was signed by major progressive figures such as Michael Albert, Medea Benjamin, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Robin Kelley, Naomi Klein, Adolph Reed, Edward Said, Stephen Shalom, Cornel West and Howard Zinn. It called for the U.S. to adopt a foreign policy that would respond to Saddam Hussein and "the threat posed to all of us by terrorist networks such as al- Qaeda, and by weapons of mass destruction," in the following ways (quoting from the statement):

- Renouncing the use of military intervention to extend and consolidate U.S. imperial power, and withdrawing U.S. troops from the Middle East.
- Ending its support for corrupt and authoritarian regimes, e.g. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Egypt.
- Opposing, and ending U.S. complicity in, all forms of terrorism worldwide — not just by al-Qaeda, Palestinian suicide bombers and Chechen hostage takers, but also by Colombian paramilitaries, the Israeli military in the Occupied Territories and Russian counterinsurgency forces in Chechnya.
- Supporting the right of national self-determination for all peoples in the Middle East, including the Kurds, Palestinians and Israeli Jews.
- Ending one-sided support for Israel in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- Taking unilateral steps toward renouncing weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, and vigorously promoting international disarmament treaties.
- Abandoning IMF/World Bank economic policies that bring mass misery to people in large parts of the world. Initiating a major foreign aid program directed at popular rather than corporate needs.

The CPD statement noted that "These initiatives, taken together, would constitute a truly democratic foreign policy. Only such a policy could begin to reverse the mistrust and outright hatred felt by so much of the world's population toward the U.S. At the same time, it would weaken the power of dictatorships and the appeal of terrorism and reactionary religious fundamentalism.

Though nothing the United States can do would decisively undermine these elements right away, over time a new U.S. foreign policy would drastically undercut their power and influence."

The vast majority of the peace movement didn't fit neatly into any one of the three categories of 1) apologists for Saddam Hussein, 2) proponents of containment, or 3) advocates of a new antiimperialist foreign policy to effectively counter dictatorship and terrorism and to provide a fundamental alternative to military intervention. However, most peace activists probably floated somewhere between the containment approach and the new foreign policy alternative to both U.S. imperialism and Saddam Hussein outlined in the CPD statement.

AS THE U.S./BRITISH OCCUPATION faces mounting obstacles in Iraq and growing disapproval at home, President Bush is desperately seeking to wriggle out of its primary prewar justifications for war, the discredited claims that Saddam Hussein possessed and was likely to use weapons of mass destruction and the suggestion that he was allied with al-Qaeda; instead the administration is shifting its core argument and is basing its case on framing the war and occupation as part of a broad U.S. campaign for democratization throughout the Middle East. This "democratization" argument was used by Bush before the war, but it played a secondary role. Now he has even gone so far as to try to create the impression that his administration has abandoned the decades of U.S. support for autocratic regimes throughout the region, sounding almost like a peace and human rights activist himself when he said, on November 6, 2003, that "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe." In November the *New York Times* reported that:

President Bush on Thursday challenged Iran, Syria and two crucial Middle East allies of the United States — Egypt and Saudi Arabia — to begin embracing democratic traditions, and to view the fall of Saddam Hussein as "a watershed event in the global democratic revolution." Mr. Bush had sounded similar themes before, notably in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute a month and a half before he ordered the invasion of Iraq. But until Thursday's speech, he had not identified nations that he thought urgently needed to reform. For the first time, he also raised, gingerly, the issue of the absence of liberty in Saudi Arabia, one of America's major oil suppliers and a nation that has long been spared presidential rebuke . . . He also pressed Egypt — which receives upward of \$2 billion annually in aid from the United States — saying it "has shown the way toward peace in the Middle East, and now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." (David E. Sanger, "Bush Asks Lands in Mideast to Try Democratic Ways," *New York Times*, 11/7/03)

The claim by President Bush that he now supports democratic reform in the Middle East is hardly credible. The *Times* article quoted above goes on to report, "But later, his [Bush's] spokesman, Scott McClellan, said the president was not threatening any consequences for his Arab allies if they failed to heed his warning." Genuine democracy in the region is incompatible with the real goals of the U.S. military intervention in Iraq — to secure a U.S. military platform in the Middle East and bases in Iraq as an alternative to remaining dependent on an increasingly undependable Saudi Arabia, to advance the global corporate capitalist system, and to gain strategic control over the vast Iraqi oil supply as a way of further enhancing U.S. global power. No truly democratic government in Iraq would long be able to defer to such U.S. military and economic interests.

Some in the peace movement seem to believe that legitimate opposition to the American

occupation is dependent on being able to demonstrate that Iraq is worse off now than it was under Saddam Hussein. This is a wrong-headed approach. In fact, comparing prewar and postwar Iraq gives a very jumbled picture. On the one hand, Saddam Hussein's grotesque repressive apparatus, including the torture chambers and rape rooms, is no longer functioning, which is obviously an improvement. But at the same time the U.S. occupation imposes a different kind of straitjacket on the political and economic future of the country, and subjects the Iraqi people to humiliation and often injury and even death at the hands of the U.S. military. Moreover, to the extent that the United States succeeds in sustaining its occupation, it is in a stronger position to dominate not only Iraqi politics but the political and economic life of other countries around the world; it is precisely imperial domination that not only is a major cause of terrible misery in the Third World but also strengthens, especially in the absence of a strong global democratic left, authoritarian and theocratic forces everywhere.

The question is not "which is worse?" — control of Iraq by Saddam Hussein, a takeover by the now growing fundamentalist theocratic forces, or imperial military control of the country. All of these options are unacceptable, and the victory of any of these forces does not in any way point toward progress. But these are not inevitably the only choices, even though positive democratic options in Iraq are today relatively weak.

The Occupation Paves the Way to Democracy?

THOSE WHO SEE THE U.S. occupation of Iraq as creating the foundation for a democratic Iraq need to face the reality of the role of U.S. troops in the country. As Thomas Crampton pointed out in his October 14, 2003 article in the *New York Times* ("Iraqi Official Urges Caution on Imposing Free Market"), the economic plan the United States is imposing makes even some of its hand-picked Iraqi leaders uneasy. Iraqi enterprises have been largely in the hands of the state, but the U.S. plans a rapid privatization that will mean huge numbers of unemployed, and that will leave the nation's wealth free from meaningful social control. Restrictions on foreign investment have been lifted in all economic sectors apart from oil and other natural resources involving primary extraction and initial processing (many suspect that this exception is merely tactical in light of strong Iraqi public opinion about preserving these resources as a public asset, and that restrictions on foreign investment in this area will be lifted in due time); import duties have been cut to 5 percent, thus threatening most Iraqi enterprises; and the maximum corporate tax rate has been set at 15 percent. In a move that Bush and his friends have not yet dared to try at home, a flat-tax system has been introduced, thus ensuring that wealthier Iraqi individuals and companies won't pay their fair share.

U.S. economic policy in Iraq is brazenly vulgar. Regulations promulgated by the U.S. Agency for International Development have required hiring only U.S. contractors, thus cutting out both Iraqis and non-U.S. foreign investors. Companies with close ties to the administration like Halliburton, Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root, and Bechtel have been flagrantly favored, often chosen without any kind of bidding process. U.S. contractors and subcontractors are charging far greater rates for their services and products than would their local Iraqi counterparts (Phyllis Bennis, "Talking Points: The Madrid Donors Conference: A Fig Leaf for Maintaining U.S. Control," Institute for Policy Studies, 10/16/03, www.ips-dc.org/comment/Bennis/figleaf.htm). Representatives Henry Waxman of California and John Dingell of Michigan have charged that "Halliburton seems to be inflating gasoline prices at a great cost to American taxpayers . . . The overcharging is so extreme that one expert has privately called it 'highway robbery,'" the lawmakers said about Halliburton's no-bid contract, noting that its Kellogg Brown & Root subsidiary is making the Army pay between \$1.62 and \$1.70 per gallon, while the average price for Middle East gasoline is 71 cents. ("Halliburton Gouging In Iraq?" CBS News, 10/16/03,

www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/16/politics/main578436.shtml).

Moreover, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is being accused of corruption in spending U.S. taxpayers' money, prompting a Congressional investigation. At the same time, in what can be seen only as a weird kind of political joke, the U.S. charges the U.S.-created Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) with cronyism and corruption, holding back on signing multimillion dollar contracts to build and operate wireless phone networks in Iraq because of (likely true) allegations that the bidding for these contracts was "hijacked by associates of the new Iraqi governing council" — even as Halliburton et al. trundle their superprofits off to the bank. ("US delays mobile phone contracts to investigate claims of Iraqi cronyism," *Financial Times*, 11/11/03).

No Pesky Unions

THE U.S.-INSTALLED IGC has in effect banned trade unions in the state sector, which right now includes the lion's share of all Iraqi enterprises. This has been accomplished through keeping Saddam Hussein's 1987 antilabor legislation firmly in place! Moreover, in June the CPA issued a decree forbidding strikes. It is difficult to see how the U.S. occupation is creating the preconditions for democratic rule in Iraq when trade unions, which have historically provided key social support for democracy in countries around the world, are de facto illegal, and workers are denied the elementary right to strike.

Iraqi workers have been routinely mistreated under the occupation. An estimated sixty to seventy percent of Iraqis are without jobs, yet U.S. employers hire overwhelmingly non-Iraqis — either Americans or inexpensive migrant laborers from South Asia. In July 2003 U.S. troops attacked members of the Union of the Unemployed engaged in peaceful protests against U.S. military and corporations' treatment of the jobless. As the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) workers union notes, "The August 2 arrest of 52 of their [Union of Unemployed] leaders is a strong indication of what kind of democracy the Bush Administration intends for the conquered country." ("Bring The Troops Home Now," resolution passed by United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America at their 2003 national convention.) [see page 33]

A fuller description of the scandalous U.S. labor policy in today's Iraq can be found in the October 25, 2003 resolution on the occupation and labor rights in Iraq, passed at the National Labor Assembly convened in Chicago by U.S. Labor Against War www.uslaboragainstawar.org. [see page 32] and in articles by David Bacon, including "The Occupation's War on Iraqi Workers" in the December 2003 issue of *The Progressive*. As this article goes to press, reports have come in of newer arrests of Iraqi trade unionists: on November 23, a U.S. military force in Baghdad arrested Qasim Hadi, president of the Union of the Unemployed in Iraq and Adil Salih, a member of union's leading committee; on December 6, U.S. occupation forces attacked the temporary headquarters of the Iraqi Federation of Workers Trade Unions (IFTU) and arrested eight of its leaders and core activists. In a statement protesting the U.S. action, the IFTU noted that occupation forces "targeted trade unionist cadres and leaders who are well-known for their struggle against the hated dictatorship." ("US Attacks Iraqi Unions' Headquarters," U.S. Labor Against War, 12/9/03, www.uslaboragainstawar.org)

How Do Iraqis Feel About the Occupation?

THOUGH BY MOST ACCOUNTS the U.S. presence in Iraq is becoming increasingly unpopular, the

specifics of Iraqi public opinion about the occupation have been unclear. According to the Associated Press, in a Gallup poll taken Aug. 28-Sept. 4, 2003, 71 percent of Baghdad's residents felt that U.S. troops should not leave in the next few months. Just 26 percent felt the troops should leave that soon. However, the poll also showed that almost one in five felt that circumstances could occur in which attacks against U.S. troops could be justified. (Posted 10/14/03 on *USA Today*.) The same AP poll, reported in *The Age* on September 24, showed that "nearly half of Baghdad residents polled have said the country is worse off now than before the U.S.-led invasion, but about two-thirds believe things will be better in five years than they were under Saddam Hussein." (Will Lester, "47 percent of Iraqis think country is worse off," *The Age*, 9/24/03).

In late October, James Zogby interpreted a poll taken in Iraq by Zogby International in August 2003:

When given the choice as to whether they "would like to see the American and British forces leave Iraq in six months, one year or two years," 31.5 percent of Iraqis say these forces should leave in six months; 34 percent say a year, and only 25 percent say two or more years. So while technically [Vice President Dick] Cheney might say that "over 60 percent [actually 59 percent] . . . want the U.S. to stay at least another year," an equally correct observation would be that 65.5 percent want the U.S. and Britain to leave in one year or less. And attitudes toward the U.S. were not positive. When asked whether over the next five years, they felt that the "U.S. would help or hurt Iraq," 50 percent said that the U.S. would hurt Iraq, while only 35.5 percent felt the U.S. would help the country. (James Zogby, "What Iraqis Think About the Occupation," *AlterNet*, 10/21/03)

Meanwhile, David Rieff, far from an anti-interventionist, reported in early November 2003 that he conducted extensive interviews while on two trips to Iraq since the declared war ended, and found that "In the back streets of Sadr City, the impoverished Baghdad suburb where almost two million Shiites live — and where Bush administration officials and Iraqi exiles once imagined American troops would be welcomed with sweets and flowers — the mood, when I visited in September, was angry and resentful." ("Blueprint for a Mess," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 11/2/03)

With every passing month, Iraqi public opinion seems to grow more negative toward the U.S. occupation. According to a mid-November story in *The New York Times*, a classified opinion poll conducted by the State Department's intelligence branch found that "a majority of Iraqis now regard American troops as occupiers rather than liberators . . ." "The trend lines are in the wrong direction,' a government official said." (Douglas Jehl, "CIA Report Suggests Iraqis Are Losing Faith in U.S. Efforts," *New York Times*, 11/13/03)

What Is the Character of the Armed Resistance to U.S. and Coalition Forces in Iraq, and Does it Matter?

PERHAPS BELIEVING THE ROSY predictions of Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, the Bush administration led the American people to expect that occupying U.S. troops would be welcomed with open arms, sweets and flowers. This has hardly been the case. From the very beginning of the occupation there have been both peaceful protests and outright military resistance against the troops. While most Iraqis may not have favored the attacks on U.S. forces at the outset, and many probably still do not support them, very few of those against the attacks have been willing to stand up and denounce them, leading Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* to lament on several occasions that he wishes that those who privately tell him and other Western

journalists that they want the U.S. forces to remain in Iraq would speak out in public and voice their support for the American and British military forces. That they don't do so can in part be ascribed to fear of retribution from supporters of Saddam Hussein, but there is good reason to believe that it also reflects widespread ambivalence about and growing opposition to the U.S. military, even among many who hated the Saddam Hussein regime and were glad to see it go. See, for example, the account of recent attacks on U.S. forces in Mosul, an area previously seen as friendly to the occupation:

. . . when word came Sunday afternoon that two American soldiers had been shot in the head and killed a block away, the men of Ras al Jada fire station ran to the site and looked on with glee as a crowd of locals dragged the Americans from their car and tore off their watches and jackets and boots. "I was happy, everyone was happy," Waadallah Muhammed, one of the firefighters said as he stood in front of the firehouse. "The Americans, yes they do good things, but only to enhance their reputation. They are occupiers. We want them to leave." . . . Attacks on Americans which have killed more than 25 in the Mosul area this month, have highlighted what local Iraqis say is a rapidly deteriorating relationship. (Dexter Filkins, "Attacks on GI's in Mosul Rise as Good Will Fades," *New York Times*, 11/27/03)

In the same vein, the *New York Times* even more recently reported:

As the guerrilla war against Iraqi insurgents intensifies, American soldiers have begun wrapping entire villages in barbed wire . . . In selective cases, American soldiers are demolishing buildings thought to be used by Iraqi attackers. They have begun imprisoning the relatives of suspected guerrillas, in hopes of pressing the insurgents to turn themselves in . . . So far, the new approach appears to be succeeding in diminishing the threat to American soldiers. But it appears to be coming at the cost of alienating many of the people the Americans are trying to win over. Abu Hishma is quiet now, but it is angry, too. (Dexter Filkins, "Tough New Tactics by U.S. Tighten Grip on Iraq Towns," 12/7/03)

As the occupying forces increasingly view the entire Iraqi population as potential enemies, and treat them accordingly, popular hatred and anger against the U.S. and its Iraqi allies are bound to increase even more.

As far as the military resistance to the Coalition Provisional Authority is concerned, the U.S. doesn't seem to know which forces predominate within it. Officials put out contradictory theories: "The Bush administration has sought to emphasize the role of foreign fighters as a factor in the resistance, but American military commanders, including General Abizaid have said that it is loyalists to Mr. Hussein who pose the greatest danger to American troops and to stability in Iraq." (Douglas Jehl, "Plan for Guerrilla Action May Have Predated War," *New York Times*, 11/15/03) In the same article General Abizaid, top U.S. military commander in Iraq, is reported as going so far as to assert, with no convincing evidence, that there are no more than 5000 guerrilla fighters in the country.

Of course it is in the interest of the U.S. to portray those who fight against the occupation as unsavory, and doubtless many of them are. But there is every reason to believe that opposition to the U.S. has already spread beyond Baathists and Islamic fundamentalists to encompass broader elements of the population who simply oppose the subjugation of their lives and their country by

outside imperialists. The critical question is whether independent and democratic forces will be independently organized and capable of projecting and advancing their own program for Iraq, or whether they will be subordinated to the agendas of Baathists and theocratic fundamentalists. The victory of independent and democratic groups in Iraq is inhibited by the U.S. occupation; peace activists need to focus on how the position of these forces could be made more viable — for example by immediately seeking to build contacts between the antiwar movement and independent democratic journalists, unionists, academics, women's groups and so on. This work has been started by U.S. Labor Against the War and others, but needs to be greatly expanded.

Does it matter who controls the resistance? Some, like British antiwar leader Tariq Ali, seem to think not. Ali probably correctly portrays the resistance as a mixed bag; he writes in *The Guardian* (UK): "According to Iraqi opposition sources, there are more than 40 different resistance organizations. They consist of Baathists, dissident communists, disgusted by the treachery of the Iraqi Communist party in backing the occupation, nationalists, groups of Iraqi soldiers and officers disbanded by the occupation, and Sunni and Shia religious groups." ("Resistance is the first step towards Iraqi independence," *The Guardian*, 11/3/03).

Ali doesn't seem to think it's necessary to examine too closely which of these elements, if any, are dominant or decisive within the resistance, or how secure their control is. His approach appears to assume that the victory of the resistance, no matter who controls it, will automatically produce a positive outcome simply because it will represent a setback for the U.S. This is not necessarily the case, however. While an end to U. S. imperialism in Iraq is certainly to be hoped for and promoted, neither a return to a hyperrepressive regime dominated by Saddam Hussein or someone like him, nor the introduction of a harsh Islamic fundamentalist dictatorship would represent progress. Some may be taken aback by this assertion, but thinking about a parallel proposition helps to illuminate the point: surely the ouster of Saddam Hussein was something all principled supporters of peace, democracy and human rights should have hoped for, but it didn't follow that his defeat by the United States military was in any sense progressive. The triumph of U.S. military power had other, overarching reactionary consequences.

Some would argue that the return of Saddam Hussein or the coming to power of a Taliban-like regime in Iraq would represent a step forward because it would be a form of Iraqi self-determination against U.S. and British imperialism. The more historically-minded among the proponents of this argument analogize the current situation in Iraq to the struggle between the Italian imperialist army and Ethiopia under the rule of Haile Selassie in the 1930s, when socialists and democrats supported the military victory of Ethiopia against Italy despite the fact that the African country was ruled by a feudal monarchy whose overthrow they supported. This analogy holds only up to a point. In both cases imperialist forces should be unreservedly opposed. But there is a critical difference between Haile Selassie and other fossilized tyrants, and the modern dictatorships of rulers like Saddam Hussein or the Taliban. (It may seem odd to describe the Taliban as modern, but in fact it does represent a bizarre fusion of an extremely retrograde religious agenda with contemporary authoritarian methods of recruitment and rule.)

Haile Selassie and his ilk were a dying breed, a premodern historical force, whereas undemocratic, aggressive regimes like those of Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic as well as terroristic religious groups like the Taliban or al-Qaeda are very real contenders for power in today's world. Their victory does not further liberation by opening up the possibilities for democracy in the way that traditional self-determination struggles do. Milosevic and Saddam Hussein are quite different from groups like the Taliban, and thus this range of forces may not constitute a "camp" in the way that the Communist opponents of Western capitalism did in the years of the Cold War, but they are not simply relics. They present a weighty alternative not only to Western capitalist imperialism but also to the forces of democracy and socialism.

In Iraq, then, it very much matters whether Baathists or repressive, extreme theocrats are definitively in the drivers' seat and would come to power if the resistance were to win against the U.S.; if either of these elements is in full control, then peace activists and democrats in Iraq and around the world should not support them — nor, of course, should they support the U.S. Figuring out the relationship of forces in a resistance that Tariq Ali describes as an assortment of Baathists, dissident communists, nationalists, former Iraqi soldiers and officers and Sunni and Shia religious groups is of great importance; of even greater importance is for antiwar and democratic activists to make common bond with the more democratic elements and support their rise to leadership in the resistance before it is too late.

U.S. Troops Out Now

WESTERN IMPERIALISM AND ITS retrograde opponents have a symbiotic relationship in which they mutually strengthen and reinforce one another. For example, by providing an "anti-terrorist" rationale, the murderous attack on the World Trade Center was a gift to those who had long wanted to expand and fortify U.S. military power around the world and to mobilize a hitherto skeptical public opinion behind an aggressive imperial agenda. But the opposite is also the case. The war against Iraq, U.S. military aggression and support for dictators and repressive regimes, and the de facto alliance between the Bush administration and Israel's Sharon government, create not only waves of new recruits for terrorism and political fundamentalists but also widespread acquiescence or even outright support for these elements among ordinary people in the Middle East.

There is a desperate need to build a militant democratic left in the Middle East, and advocates of a new democratic U.S. foreign policy can only succeed over time if they are able to link up with and support the victory of fledgling progressive forces in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt and throughout the Middle East and around the world. But a precondition for making these links is an unambiguous independence from and opposition to U.S. imperial power. Some in the U.S. and Britain who opposed the war today support the occupation as an unfortunate necessity now that Saddam Hussein has been toppled. And others formally oppose the occupation, but nonetheless also oppose the slogan of "Troops Out Now" — which can only mean that they support "Troops Out Later When Some Conditions Are Met" and in the meantime U.S., British and other "Coalition" forces should stay in Iraq.

These reluctant supporters of imperial military power justify their position on the grounds that if U.S. forces leave now there may be a Baathist return to power, the introduction of a harsh Shiite theocracy, chaos or civil war. One or another of these might indeed happen if the U.S. leaves, but the fact is that the longer the U.S. stays, the more powerful the reactionary forces become, and the more likely they are to win out in any future conflict. A *New York Times* story of November 27, for example, notes that "Moderate Iraqis cooperating with the Americans say the young men of Mosul are increasingly heeding the calls of militant clerics." (Dexter Filkins, "Attacks on GI's in Mosul Rise as Good Will Fades") What exists now in Iraq can be described as a form of chaos, and further chaos and civil war with repressive forces leading in contention is precisely what continuing U.S. occupation is breeding, not preventing.

Another justification sometimes given for the U.S. keeping its military in Iraq "for now" is that withdrawal might mean that Iraq will split into three parts: a predominantly Kurdish north, a largely Shiite south and the remaining center of the country, where most of the Sunnis live. This split may well happen once the U.S. leaves, but it would not necessarily be a retrograde development. The country of Iraq was an artificial colonial invention in the first place, and has no automatic reason to remain united, though the breakup of the country would obviously raise crucial questions of minority rights in each of the three new nations. Peace activists and democrats should keep an open mind about the necessity of maintaining the "territorial integrity" of Iraq; given the freedom to choose, the

peoples of Iraq may not want to live in one country, and if they don't, the challenge will be to foster a breakup that is as peaceful and mindful of minority rights as possible.

In response to the unexpectedly high level of resistance to the U.S.-led occupation in Iraq, there are signs that the United States may decide to desert its handpicked Iraqi Governing Council and declare an end to the occupation as early as June of 2004. But even if the U.S. resorts to this option, this does not mean that it will abandon its hope of continuing to dominate Iraq. The Bush administration has made it clear that it intends to install permanent U.S. bases in Iraq, even if the formal occupation ends, and Washington will use every resource in its arsenal — from troops to economic pressure — to insure that whatever government comes to power is subservient to U.S. interests.

Can the UN Security Council Save the Day?

MANY PEOPLE PROPOSE that the solution to the current U.S. occupation of Iraq is for the United Nations to play a greater role. Supporters of this approach come from very different political viewpoints. Some, like Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright support a form of multilateralism and greater UN involvement as a more sophisticated way to secure U.S. interests and power. Peace activists and others look to the UN to provide a genuine peaceful and democratic solution for Iraq and to offer an alternative to U.S. domination of the region.

As presently constituted, however, the United Nations is hardly a vehicle for democratic, accountable resolution of conflicts among or within countries, especially where the question of control of the resources and wealth of Third World countries by First World interests is paramount. Five nations — the U.S., Britain, France, Russia, and China — constitute the so-called Permanent Five (P-5) members of the Security Council, and they each wield a veto over Council decisions. These countries are not elected to their positions, they occupy them "permanently" as a consequence of the power they held at the end of World War II. It is important to keep in mind that the Security Council voted for the first Gulf War (thus making it "multilateral" — a cautionary note), and administered the deadly sanctions against Iraq right up through the beginning of the 2003 war. And while in a move remarkable for its singularity the Security Council refused to rubber-stamp the second U.S. war on Iraq, in October 2003 the Council backtracked and shamefully legitimized the "Coalition" occupation of the country.

In the decades since the founding of the United Nations, there have been countless attempts to reform the Security Council and democratize the UN system; all thus far unsuccessful. Given this fact, it is difficult to understand what truly progressive resolution of the situation in Iraq peace activists expect that the UN Security Council can implement. It is, of course, conceivable that the U.S. occupation of Iraq will become untenable and the United States will have to relinquish formal control of the country. At that point, however, UN intervention could well be worse than nothing — it could easily provide a new fig leaf for U.S. hegemony. And even if it did not simply provide cover for the U.S., is it realistic to expect that a United Nations Security Council dominated by the great powers will actually voluntarily hand over control of Iraq's resources and strategic military position to the Iraqi people themselves? Is the Council likely, for example, to repudiate the U.S.-imposed policy of privatization of the nation's enterprises, or the edict requiring that Iraq give predatory rights to foreign investors? It is far more probable that France, Russia and (from outside the P-5 group) the Germans will simply see to it that they get their share of lucrative Iraqi reconstruction contracts, while cooperating to promote a more presentable government in Iraq that nonetheless is dependent on and cooperative with the Great Powers and their interests. Of course such plans may founder, just as today's U.S. occupation looks like it may, but that doesn't mean that proponents of peace and human rights should call for a Security Council-imposed solution. (On the issue of whether UN intervention should be supported, even under the aegis of the Security Council, Liberia

and Rwanda may be exceptions to the general rule given how horrific the situations have been in those countries and the relatively minor imperial motivation there was or would have been in such interventions — but that's no reason to discard a general stance of nonsupport.)*

Appreciating the problems with the Security Council, Institute for Policy Studies foreign policy analyst Phyllis Bennis has come up with an innovative approach: "The UN General Assembly, as well as individual governments and groups of governments, should be pressured to take up the Iraq question, removing it from the sole control of the Security Council. The Assembly should be urged to condemn pre-emptive war and to call for an immediate end to the U.S.-UK occupation." ("Talking Points," quoted above) This proposal is problematic in that it may mean giving power not directly to Iraqis but to an outside body, but it is interesting in that it attempts to circumvent Security Council control over United Nations intervention.

In an important article Jeremy Brecher begins to spell out a similar creative approach to the United Nations when he calls for a "Shadow UN" of "national governments and groups such as the coalition of the unwilling, the Non-Aligned Movement, and regional organizations" that could "circumvent a U.S. veto in the Security Council by activating the General Assembly." (Jeremy Brecher, "Terminating the Bush Juggernaut," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 5/1/03, www.foreignpolicyinfocus.org), Brecher cites a recent attempt to begin to chip away at the power of the Security Council: "In April 2003, General Assembly President and Iraq War opponent Jan Kavan began trying to establish a General Assembly-based forum to openly debate current foreign policy issues, providing critics of the U.S. an opportunity to address U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. moved rapidly to derail the initiative, sending a confidential note to several foreign capitals saying that Kavan's proposal would degenerate into a 'politically divisive' talk shop that would 'infringe upon' the Security Council's exclusive right to deal with threats to global peace and security. 'This represents a backdoor amendment to the U.N. Charter,' the note added." (In correspondence with this author on Nov. 18, 2003, Kavan confirmed the events Brecher described, writing that "The [Brecher] quote you sent me is basically accurate. The 'interactive dialogue platforms' which we proposed within the framework of the revitalization of the General Assembly were not supposed to discuss just Iraq or Afghanistan but absolutely any topic member states would wish to raise. The proposal and the surprising US response was described quite accurately at length at that time by [the] *Washington Post*." (The account can be found in an article by Colum Lynch, "U.S. Blocking Criticism at the UN; Officials Fear Debate Provides Platform for Policy Foes, 5/1/03). One must, of course, question whether the U.S. response was at all "surprising," given that the proposal threatened to curtail its power over the United Nations.

It is important to bear in mind that while the General Assembly is far preferable to the Security Council, particularly on anticolonial issues facing the Third World, it is itself deeply flawed by the undue influence and power of wealthy countries, and by the fact that many of the member countries themselves are undemocratic and thus incapable of consistently representing the real interests of their own people. (There is also the problem that small and large countries have identical representation, but this could be relatively easily remedied.) True UN reform is inseparable from the grassroots struggle for global economic equity and democracy, including within countries like Malaysia which have been among the most militant in demanding an end of the domination of UN security decisions by the P-5 Security Council members. Nonetheless, the Kavan proposal was a step in the right direction.

Summarizing the divergent views in the antiwar movement about the United Nations, Brecher writes " . . . whereas most of the [peace] movement has expressed strong support for the principles underlying the United Nations and has campaigned for governments to support those ideals, a significant minority views the UN as itself little more than an agent of imperialism, something to be disempowered rather than reformed." In my opinion the peace movement needs to go beyond the

two options Brecher gives, reforming versus disempowering the United Nations. Peace activists need to fight for democratic reform of the UN and of the countries within it. They should also simultaneously demand that the UN, including the Security Council, do the right thing — e.g., refuse to go along with the U.S. war on Iraq, and the victors' postwar occupation. Meanwhile, however, the Council (as opposed to the UN itself), as it is presently constituted, should indeed be disempowered.

Regime Change at Home

WITH ITS NAKED ASSERTION of the right to pre-emptive war, its open contempt for the opinions of other countries, and its war on Iraq, the Bush administration has escalated both the rhetoric and the reality of U.S. imperial power. But Bush and the Republicans do not bear sole responsibility. While a majority of Democratic members of Congress (if one aggregates the House and Senate votes) voted against a resolution supporting the war, the Democratic Party was never seen as championing opposition to it, and once the war started, what Democratic opposition there was largely dissipated, except for mavericks like Dennis Kucinich and John Conyers.

Democratic dissent against the war was hardly audible until popular dissatisfaction with the failures of the occupation began to manifest itself in the fall of 2003. Even then, Democratic opposition was hardly adequate. On October 16, for example, Ted Kennedy, one of the more outspoken Democrats, made a sharp attack on the administration's request for \$87 billion to finance the occupation, but at the same time he declared that the U.S. "cannot withdraw now, leaving Iraq to chaos or civil war . . . We need a realistic and specific plan to bring stability to Iraq, to bring genuine self-government to Iraq, to bring our soldiers home with dignity and honor." Kennedy's statement is grounded in the assumption that the U.S. is capable of bringing democratic stability to Iraq. This is an illusion: just look at the results of the first six months of occupation, and, as is plain for all to see, the situation is rapidly going downhill.

Howard Dean was the only candidate that the media was paying attention to who unequivocally opposed the war. The Democratic establishment was united in its opposition to Dean because he refused to let them stitch up the process and anoint some complete insider hack. It's a positive development, basically, that ordinary Democrats embraced someone who is perceived as an "outsider" whose candidacy can be used to oppose the war and shake up the party. The problem is that Dean doesn't oppose the occupation any more than Kennedy does, and that if elected he will easily make peace with the Democratic Party mainstream on the fundamental domestic and international issues. (The Gore endorsement of Dean signifies an important first step in this rapprochement.) Dean's critique of the U.S. war on Iraq never objected to the assumptions of both Democrats and Republicans that U.S. power in the world needs to be advanced, and that the United States should pursue a procorporate foreign policy.

Senator Joseph Biden, along with many other Democrats including Senator Hilary Clinton, is worse than either Kennedy or Dean. Despite his criticisms of the administration for being too unilateral, Biden now calls for an *increase* in the numbers of U.S. troops in Iraq. Mainstream Democratic Party critics of U.S. foreign policy, along with critics from the CIA, the military, and former Cold War allies like Germany, perform a valuable function of opening up the debate and to a certain extent delegitimizing the crude use of American power in the world. This opening can be extremely useful, and the peace movement needs to take advantage of it. However, it is crucial that the movement also recognizes and exposes the limitations of these critics to people both in the U.S. and abroad, and limit common action to areas of actual agreement.

But Don't We Have to Defend Ourselves?

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S APPEAL for the support of the American people rests on the claim that

only a tough military approach can defend ordinary Americans against maniacal dictators and terrorist attackers. People in this country are becoming uneasy with this claim, especially as the war in Iraq seems unending, the U.S. victory in Afghanistan unravels, the number of casualties and deaths of U.S. soldiers in Iraq continues to mount, and terrorist attacks spread around the globe. If only we had a resolute, progressive opposition party in this country, free of corporate control, that could turn Bush's claim around and clearly state that a democratic and egalitarian foreign policy is the only answer to the threats of dictatorship and terrorism! Such a party could point out that the iron fist, the police state, and endless war don't enhance security for anyone, in the long or the short run. And such an opposition could crystallize growing public unease with Bush's approach into powerful opposition to the occupation of Iraq and, by extension, future military attacks on Iran, Syria, North Korea or elsewhere.

But we have no such opposition party, so we are going to have to start mounting our protests from the bottom up, handicapped at every point by not yet having a political voice. There are hopeful signs. Unofficial reports reveal widespread low morale in the military (recall that it was precisely such low morale that played a key role in ending the Vietnam war), and military family members have been courageously speaking out against the war and occupation. The peace movement is once again stirring, and many politicians are seeing the war as a point of vulnerability for the Bush administration. Other countries balk at bailing the U.S. out of the mess in Iraq. All of this may result in a U.S. defeat in Iraq. But to avoid more dangerous and destructive imperial ventures in the future, we need to start now to build not only a vigorous protest movement in the streets but an independent political party that can champion a truly nonimperialist, democratic foreign policy.

December 9, 2003

Footnotes

* Several friends and colleagues in the peace movement have suggested to me that while they do not favor an extended UN occupation of Iraq for precisely the reasons I have outlined, they do advocate a very brief period of UN control after U.S. troops completely leave Iraq, during which time real elections (as opposed to the sham "caucus" process advocated by the U.S. exactly in order to avoid true elections) would be speedily set up and carried out. I am deeply skeptical about whether the UN Security Council, with the Permanent Five members each having a veto, would ever design a prompt and fair election process and leave the country quickly after the voting, but I have not totally closed the door to being convinced about the value of proposing this option. It would be very useful for the peace movement to open up a broad public international discussion about whether it would be possible to constrain the Security Council so that it would not have a blank check to do as it pleases in Iraq and would be forced to carry out this agenda for fair and timely elections in Iraq followed by a rapid, total withdrawal.