

Will the Occupation End in 2006?

**On March 20, the US occupation
of Iraq will enter its fourth year.
But 2006 could just be its last.**

The occupation itself is in deep trouble, the morale of the troops is low, and the Pentagon is having a hell of a time finding new ones. The Bush administration and the US government as a whole are mired in a crisis of legitimacy, sinking under the twin weights of Iraq and Katrina.



Representative John Murtha, the High Command's best friend in Congress, has come out for immediate withdrawal.

The anti-war/anti-occupation movement can play a huge role in this volatile situation, but there are some big "ifs." If we can avoid being sidetracked and suffocated by the Democratic electoral bid in what will be a high-stakes mid-term election this fall. If new breakthroughs can be made in mobilizing the 50% or more of the population who think the troops should come home now. If we don't buckle under increased attacks from the right.

Make no mistake. We face a powerful enemy and we have daunting tasks. Will 2006 be the year the occupation grinds to an inglorious end? Maybe. Maybe not. But what we do now will surely bring that long-awaited day closer.

**End the Occupation!
Bring Them Home Now!**

The occupation goes from bad to worse

On every front, the occupation faces a rockier road than ever. Since September, not one but two new White House–announced Turning Points™ have come and gone — the September constitutional referendum and the December elections.

Nothing turned, and the suffering of the Iraqi people continues to be catastrophic, with a destroyed infrastructure, unprecedented unemployment, rampant crime, public health in collapse and little hope for improvement. No wonder a leaked poll secretly taken by the British Ministry of Defense in August showed 82% of the Iraqi population “strongly opposed” to the occupation!

Unable to subdue or even dent the armed resistance organizations it faces, the US military has reverted to Vietnam mode. Body counts, derided and even forbidden by the Pentagon earlier in the occupation, are now a daily feature of Green Zone press briefings. Terror tactics, such as massive bombing and shelling of whole areas, herd people into controlled camps like those outside Fallujah, as basic infrastructure, like the bridges across the Euphrates, is destroyed.

Forget the promised reconstruction of the country US aggression has so totally devastated. Most of the \$30 billion Congress appropriated is gone, with less than 7% not yet spent or committed. Gone — stolen, wasted, used for military purposes, shifted to Halliburton’s bottom line, but gone. And that’s it — Bush just announced he won’t request another dime for reconstruction.

In military terms, the occupation cannot continue indefinitely. That’s the good news. But without the cost rising still higher, they can keep it going for years to come. The key factor for their ability to keep going is the troops. As long as the administration can keep sending soldiers back into the meat-grinder to replace the ones who die, are wounded, or manage to get out, they can keep a beachhead for US imperialism on Iraqi soil.

But the toll the war is taking on the troops is horrendous. Morale is sinking. Some units are on or about to start their fourth deployment in theater! While some of the resentment naturally turns against the brass and the Bushies, the chain of command and the carefully vetted media piped to the troops tell them daily that they are victims of a liberal plot to sabotage the mission, “cut and run,” and deny them victory.

They have no strategy

It is important to understand that the administration has no strategy; they are just improvising. There are plenty of military and political experts around recommending strategic plans of every description — buckle down for a ten-year occupation, jump troop levels and kick ass, shift to an air war and let the bombs fall where they may, cut and walk fast, let Iraq split into three states, take the war to Iran, invite in the Arab League, and on and on — but Bush and Co. just blunder ahead.

Though they have no strategy, they still cling to their original goal: a semi-stable puppet regime, substantial control over Iraq’s oil, and permanent US military bases, all providing greater US dominance in the region. None of these goals is even a remote possibility at this point.

For starters, any regime in Iraq which doesn’t reflect that 82% Yankee Go Home sentiment will by definition be unstable. Internal divisions fueled by the occupation, both intentionally and cluelessly, may still tear the country apart entirely. Oil? Although the destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure means that a new regime will have to turn to outside sources for expertise and capital, it’s not likely

that the US will be choice number one. Additionally, it will take years after fighting dies down to get the oilfields back in shape again; and even though the US is letting the Kurds, their only reliable allies, assert control of the oilfields near Kirkuk, that oil has to get out through territory the Kurds will never control.

The same holds for US bases. Bases in Sunni areas will always be targets, the Shi'ites' Iranian backers aren't about to stand for US bases aimed at them, and who exactly is going to let the Pentagon supply bases in landlocked Kurdistan? Turkey?

The occupation, Katrina and the crisis of legitimation

The occupation of Iraq, which has been the central feature of US foreign policy since 2003, stands pretty much exposed. It's commonly understood that the attack on Iraq was based on lies and that the administration had no plans for the occupation. Most of all, it's painfully obvious that things aren't getting one bit better. The catastrophic failure of the US government to deal with Hurricane Katrina has created a parallel loss of confidence on the level of domestic politics.

Not just the Bush administration but the US government as a whole is widely seen as incapable of fulfilling its normal responsibilities. Its legitimacy, its reason for being, its right to rule, are being called into question. And the failure of the "opposition party" Democrats to present any coherent alternative is part and parcel of this crisis of legitimation.

Sectors of the monopoly capitalist class are getting mighty nervous about the mess their government has gotten into. Instead of the US bestriding the globe as the sole remaining superpower and setting the terms for world commerce and politics, they watch with dismay as the state apparatus decays under the incompetent and corrupt cronies Bush placed in charge. As the Bush Administration tries to salvage Iraq, China has faced little challenge in expanding its influence in Asia and Africa, and Latin America has been swept by a massive anti-*Yanqui* political tide.

In the geo-strategic Middle East, the US has earned an even deeper hatred. Crimes against the people of Iraq and Afghanistan are daily news. So is the US alliance with the Zionist rulers of Israel who pushed Bush to attack Iraq and who retain US support for the ongoing project of forcing Palestinians into Bantustans. One major effect has been the swelling ranks of anti-Western *jibadi* groups, as both CIA and British MI5 reports acknowledge.

This ruling-class nervousness is apparent in the increasingly monopolized mainstream media, which have suddenly ripped into administration scandals and policy failures with a vigor unimaginable even a year ago.

A sense of unease

The mood of the masses is unsettled as well. To be sure, there's a certain giddy feeling spreading among a whole lot of people who loathe Bush and the Republican right. Underneath that, though, and among broader sections of the people runs a current of deep anxiety and fatalism. Things seem out of control. The economy may not have been badly dented — yet — by serious shocks like Katrina and structur-

al problems like the soaring deficit. That isn't helping the majority of people who look at gas prices, layoffs, empty bank accounts, threatened medical coverage and vanishing pensions and worry that the whole thing's bound to go pear-shaped soon.

The massive wave of corruption scandals starting to break over DC will only deepen cynicism and people's sense of distance from government, especially since the Republican Party's defense of choice is "Everybody does it." The latest revelations of illegal domestic spying will probably undermine the strongest suit the administration and the Republican Party have — the "War on Terror" fear factor. On the other hand, these reports may increase the popular sense of anxiety and also push the country toward a constitutional crisis, as Bush and his hard-core supporters fight openly for an unfettered imperial Presidency.

This provides obvious, and very real, opportunities for organizers, but let's not underestimate how dangerous such a mood can be. A letter recently sent to a veterans and military families website declared:

I say we put the military commanders in charge of the war And in charge of the government. They know what to do, they will withdraw from iraq. And run this country like a tight ship. I don't even have anyone i know In the war; but i sure do care about the ones there, every morning i wake Up thinking about them.

Crises of legitimation are by their very nature temporary phenomena. It is not clear when and how this one will end. The open-ended nature of the current conjuncture leaves open all sorts of possibilities: the administration succeeds in claiming the power to rule by fiat, worried capital imposes a new staff and cabinet on Bush, a section of Congressional Republicans rebels and blocs with the Democrats, Democrats arrive at a program beyond "wait and watch, gloat and hope" and start setting the agenda, impeachment gains traction, one party scores a decisive win in the fall elections...

Factors well beyond the control of the anti-war/anti-occupation forces, some probably not yet on the radar, will determine the timeline and the outcome of this crisis. But because the disastrous occupation of Iraq is so central to the crisis, what we do or don't do in the coming months will affect its resolution overall. And what we do or don't do will certainly do much to determine how the issue of the war is resolved as legitimacy is restored, however shakily.

Murtha turns on the lights

On November 16, Democratic Congressman John Murtha of Pennsylvania put the future of the occupation in play in a big way, by calling for an immediate US withdrawal from Iraq. He took care to point out that he was only catching up with the sentiment of the American people. This has had a major impact on the bourgeois political debate over dealing with Iraq. Not only is Murtha a decorated Marine veteran who initially was all for the war, but he also has tight ties with the upper ranks of the professional military. He is speaking for at least some of them when he warns that the occupation of Iraq is destroying the Armed Forces.

What Murtha's stand did was shine a bright light on the collapsing occupation, the gorilla nearly everyone in government was trying to pretend wasn't sitting in the middle of the room. Since then, not much has happened on the surface, but a deepening set of cracks is spreading through Congress. Several Presidential hopefuls spent 2005 positioning themselves for a run as the ones who could win the war Bush had bollixed. These included Democratic Senators Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton and Republican Senator John McCain. Now Murtha and the worsening situation on the ground has them backing off ever so care-

fully and stepping up their attacks on details about how the occupation has been conducted.

Meanwhile, other Democratic politicians, like influential California Representative Nancy Pelosi, have decided to go with Murtha, at least in their public positions. Most, however, are still saying little, handicapped by their earlier support of the war, fearful of being baited as unpatriotic and hopeful that the Republicans will simply self-destruct in a blaze of scandal. So far they are not paying much of a price for lying in the cut.

2006 — will the elections sap our movement?

All of this ensures that the most important feature of US political life for the next year (barring a Bush resignation or impeachment) will be the 2006 elections. The crisis of legitimation means that program and power both are up for grabs. This high-stakes environment is an extremely risky one for the anti-war/anti-occupation movement.

We've already seen Congressional Republicans grow panicky and unable to maintain the internal discipline needed to push prized sections of their agenda. They're already debating the necessity and the best way of distancing themselves from the Presidency they were just shock troops for.

For their part, the Democrats smell a possible sweep of the House and the Senate. They're counting on Bush's sinking poll numbers and the Republican corruption scandals to produce a wave of revulsion in the electorate.

The war criminals of the Bush Administration have been the main target of the anti-war/anti-occupation movement from the beginning. However, it is widely recognized that this crew is unlikely to "change course," i.e., admit they screwed up royally. Neither the claims they have staked to an imperial Presidency nor the hardcore reactionary base they have worked so hard to mobilize and empower could survive such a shift.

Making sure politicians feel the heat

In the last six months a growing section of the movement has chosen instead to focus on Congress. More Senators and Representatives are willing to criticize the war and call for an "exit strategy" thanks to popular disgust and anger, and to targeted grassroots lobbying efforts, especially by groups like Military Families Speak Out. This activism is influenced by memories of the Vietnam era when Congress had to refuse to appropriate more money for the war before the final nail was driven into the coffin of that murderous adventure.

This is an important development, because until these pols feel real heat, no matter what they say, they're gonna keep voting for every penny the Pentagon says it needs. (Even John Murtha, so firm in the face of savage criticism, finds his nerve fails him here, saying it's hard for him to contemplate voting against money "for the troops.") The drive to change the balance of forces in Congress has also led to a new emphasis on exposing and slamming pro-war Democrats, especially ambitious, high-profile types like Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Joseph Lieberman and Dianne Feinstein.

In the next six months we are going to feel enormous pressures to bury not only such legislatively targeted efforts, but our whole movement and our main demands deep, deep, deep. What we face in

2006 is a coming together of factors into an objective push to subordinate the anti-war/anti-occupation struggle to the liberal cause of breaking the Republican stranglehold on government.

The traditional institutional and social base of the Democratic Party — social reform and humanitarian organizations, the lawyers, the trade unions, the Black establishment, the liberal petty bourgeoisie — are desperate. They have to block the losses that another two years of Republican control of the executive, legislative and, increasingly, judicial branches will bring with them. And they don't want to provide targets for the Republicans' most likely line of counterattack, baiting the Dems as wussies, traitors, cut-and-run artists, soft on terrorism.

The new, often more liberal, forces working to revive the moribund Democratic Party from the base (particularly Deaniacs, the MoveOn / Air America axis and the growing DailyKos node in the blogosphere) are very vulnerable both to the seductions of power and the threat of being returned to marginal status. They already have won a lot of ground within the party where they are locked in combat with the DLC centrists and Rahm Emanuel, but, for the most part, they draw the line at "divisive" primary campaigns and supporting anti-war candidacies which might result in a Democratic loss. As the pressures on them grow, they too will become more inclined to shove the occupation into the background.

Avoiding a rerun of 2004

We can ill afford a rerun of 2004. Then, John Kerry, running as a win-the-war candidate, got not only the votes, but a lot of the precious resources — time, money, internet networks — of sincere individuals who had been very active in the anti-war struggle and other mass movements. Though the anti-war/anti-occupation movement maintained its autonomy better than most, our efforts were diminished, too. We have to remind folks of one harsh fact: What did they get for it? Zip. Zilch. Nada. To this day Kerry won't stand up for an end to the occupation.

One part of the answer is to spread the stand taken by Military Families Speak Out and *The Nation* magazine, among others — no support for any politician, no matter how critical the race may seem, who does not call clearly for an immediate end to the US occupation of Iraq.

Another part is to hold fast to the NOW in the slogan Bring Them Home NOW! Few today argue for keeping the troops there forever, so getting politicians or anyone else to agree to general yak-yak or vague Congressional resolutions about "exit strategies" or "troop draw-downs" doesn't really mean wavering middle forces are getting off the fence. It just means the real fight has been postponed and, in the meantime, they've been let off the hook. Most importantly, it leaves the door wide open for Bush & Co. to play games by withdrawing a bunch of troops and claiming progress toward ending the occupation in the run-up to November.

Of course, the blunt fact is that even particular targeting of, winning over, backing down or voting out of office of pro-war legislators is only a tactic. The strategy still has to be building a resistance to the war so broad and so powerful that pols of whatever description must flee the occupation like Ebola or risk losing their seats.

The central problem facing the movement

This brings us right to the key problem the movement has to overcome. There is very broad sentiment against the war in the US, with most polls showing a solid majority for immediate or very rapid withdrawal. Yet

that sentiment has not resulted in any significant identification with and participation in anti-war activity. If 50% of the people of this country oppose the continuation of the occupation, perhaps 5% have taken any active step to end it. We are off by an order of magnitude!

There is much to be said about the obstacles to going broader, but four points should be highlighted.

- The general mood among the broad sections of the people combines anxiety and fatalism and is reflected in a deep cynicism. The widespread sense of powerlessness reflects an ugly reality — in the current conjuncture, as long as folks are isolated and atomized, they will be powerless. This sense of powerlessness affects even activists. A lot of us have tired of getting on buses and going to Washington to delight in our numbers, spirit and diversity — then returning home to admit that nothing much seems to have changed.
- Except in a vague, everything-is-screwed-up way, most people don't perceive themselves as being directly affected by the war, or threatened by it, as so many families were in the Vietnam era because of the draft. This is changing, as the war is increasingly sensed as a cancer affecting the economy, while social services atrophy and the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast can't get off the ground.
- We are often prisoners of our own assumptions (largely unconscious) that by now "everybody knows" what's going on because we've been so immersed in it for years. There are still millions of people who don't recognize the name of Cindy Sheehan, the biggest media star this movement has produced, let alone crucial figures like, say, Congressman Murtha. We must remember to keep the threshold of entry into the movement, that vital first step, as low as we can. Folks can learn inside our ranks.
- The anti-war/anti-occupation movement has been successfully demonized. We are the victims of the well-honed right-wing attack machine centered in talk radio to make an enemy of an individual, an organization or a movement, and many of us barely realize it. Millions of folks who should be in our ranks have been conditioned to think of us as hairy '60s leftovers, deranged America-haters or hard-core liberals fronting for the Democratic Party. Our approach to movement-building must be strongly oriented toward overcoming this handicap.

Let's make some breakthroughs!

All this means that if we want 2006 to be the year the occupation ends, our movement has to keep doing what we've been doing and do it better, we have to start doing some things we have talked about more than acted on, and we have to move into and occupy some new territory.

The decision by United for Peace and Justice and other forces to concentrate on building local activities for the third anniversary of the invasion is a way to start taking up these tasks. As local groups come together or are reinvigorated and as networks like UFPJ are strengthened, the possibility of launching more tightly coordinated national actions like the Vietnam Moratorium of 1969 becomes more real.

A. Veterans and military families remain the key force for the anti-war movement. Their sacrifices cannot be denied nor their voices ignored. When Cindy Sheehan set up Camp Casey in Crawford and

wrong-footed Bush, millions listened to her. Poll results show the turn in public sentiment against the war accelerated after August. These forces are also the key link to the troops now serving (dozens of whom have joined Iraq Veterans Against the War). They are the best way to circumvent the brass's propaganda and to get the stories of those trapped in Iraq to the people of this country.

B. More resources and attention must be directed to independent organizations doing anti-war work in communities of color. These communities have already made enormous, if little-acknowledged, contributions to ending the occupation — for example, the halving of Black enlistments in the last four years has been a crippling blow to the Pentagon. Systemic racism means that African Americans, Latina/os, people of the First Nations, immigrants and other oppressed minorities suffer directly and immediately from budget cuts and all sorts of domestic blowback from Iraq. It also means that they grasp more readily the connection between The War Abroad and The War At Home, a lesson underlined by Katrina.

To build on this sentiment and to mobilize folks for action means supporting groups like the New Jersey-based People's Organization for Progress. For POP, their longstanding focus on issues of concern to the community, like police brutality and gang violence, has naturally extended to the war. POP has held consistent pickets at recruiting stations and demonstrations at government offices. The slowly-jelling Latinos Against the War is another important development on this front, especially since the Pentagon has stepped up recruiting in their communities.

Keep Katrina front & center

C. We have to ramp up education about the war's tie-ins to domestic issues, especially cuts in benefits for poor and working folk and general economic uncertainty. Use the example of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation of the Gulf Coast constantly! This is a connection that millions have already made in their own heads, that resources being wasted in Iraq remain desperately needed here in the US. Three years of experience can be drawn on in agitation in unions, communities and elsewhere: "As long as the occupation is going on there, nothing good is gonna happen here..."

D. We have to emphasize the long-term costs of continuing the war. The ongoing cost is 1.6 billion dollars every week. And monetary costs are tied into other less tangible costs. Every coffin that comes home is a productive woman or man lost for good. Every new severe injury will affect an individual, a family, a community — for decades to come.

E. Churches have not yet been fully mobilized as a vehicle for opposition. Traditional peace churches have been a cornerstone of the movement from the start. But much more is possible — a recent conference of more than 100 clergy and active laypeople in North Carolina, many of them African American, hammered out an action plan for doing outreach among congregations and targeting the state's politicians. Are North Carolina's churches really that much more advanced than those in other states? Of course not. The difference was that a handful of organizers dug in and spent months doing systematic outreach and planning.

Breaking into new terrain

F. We need well-thought-out actions that go into newer terrain — geographically and demographically. The three-week, three-route Bring Them Home Now bus tour that left Crawford to hit DC for the big

September 24 actions drew crowds where as many as 25% said it was the first political event they had ever attended. Dave Cline, president of Veterans For Peace, points out that a lot of the bus tour events were just outdoor whistle stops in a city, drawing in the bulk of their audience from passers-by.

This is replicable in cities (or perhaps for small regional tours) — assemble an articulate vet or two, a couple of loved ones of serving troops or Gold Star family members. Get a permit for a busy spot in a neighborhood shopping district. Try and get stories on local media in advance. Leaflet the immediate area a couple days before. Get a portable sound system or at least a decent bullhorn and have your speakers talk from their life experience and you'll pick up a crowd fast enough. Avoid giving most of the play to local peace activists, ministers, politicians — the point is to try and connect with everyday people by sharing experiences they can relate to. Have something for the folks who stop and get into it to do: Write and mail a postcard, buy and wear a button, attend a vigil, anything... (And download enlistment forms from the Army's website to offer hecklers to sign.)

G. Counter-recruitment activity has contributed to the decline in enlistments and what the brass considers a “fall-off in quality” among those who do sign on. Thus it has helped fuel the Pentagon's huge new expenditure of resources on recruitment (up to and including \$125,000 re-enlistment bonuses for certain specialties, like Arabic speakers and Special Forces). Counter-recruitment has proved a good way to get high school and college students active on their campuses, and newly-discharged Iraq vets report that talking with their peers is a very good way to ease into public speaking against the war.

The importance of this work has been oversold at times. The Pentagon has shifted its recruiting energies to rural areas, which now produce 45% of new troops at this point and where organized forces are weaker and flag-waving “support the troops” sentiment stronger. And activists are still looking for realistic alternatives for young folks who don't want to go to Iraq, but consider enlistment because they want a paycheck, educational benefits, and a way out of a dead-end existence.

H. Militant actions should not automatically be counterposed to broad-based local organizing and in certain circumstances, can even broaden it further. At a People's Organization for Progress action against the occupation last winter, dozens sat down in the middle of the busiest intersection in Newark, NJ, blocking traffic and drawing loud support from passers-by.

The contradiction with the need to keep a low doorsill of entry to the movement is a real one, but if actions are undertaken by folks seen as having a real right to speak, like military families and vets, and targets and tactics are chosen carefully, negative feedback can be minimized. “Occupations Against the Occupation” is a tactic increasingly used to target politicians who refuse to stand up against the war, as with the January occupation of the Portland, ME offices of Senators Olympia Snow and Susan Collins.

This year, the less these activities are purely symbolic and choreographed in advance with the local police, the stronger they will be and the greater impact they can have. Especially in dealing with politicians, get right in there and jam them — do they really want to call the cops or press charges against veterans or military family members?

The inevitable counterattack

Attacks on the anti-war/anti-occupation movement are going to get worse. We've seen public relations barrages aimed at folks like Michael Moore, Cindy Sheehan and even Representative Murtha to try and erode their moral and political authority, their right to speak.

We have been fortunate that so far the administration's main worry, and hence main target, has been the Democratic Party, and that their main immediate goal is to get the media cowed again. On January 9, President Bush in effect cried Treason, accusing Democratic politicians of giving "comfort to our adversaries" and failing "to debate responsibly when American troops are risking their lives overseas." This escalation also reflects an attempt at damage control as the furor grows about the NSA and other government agencies conducting massive illegal spying operations against US citizens (including anti-war groups like the Quaker-led Pledge of Resistance-Baltimore).

Charges that the Karl Rove attack machine directs at pols like Howard Dean and Hillary Clinton will also be applied to us, of course. In a way, that lets us off easy. Right-wing efforts to convince people that Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid is objectively working for Osama bin Laden will make similar claims against us seem less convincing.

But, if we start to make some of the breakthroughs discussed above, the Bush administration will be forced to step up its attacks, and it is unlikely that they will restrict themselves to character assassination of a few public anti-war figures. They have the venom and they have the resources, like ones already in use: NSA spying programs, the USA PATRIOT Act provision against "disruption" of politicians and officials, and the placement of anti-occupation writers and activists on the "terrorist" No Fly list. Other straws in the wind indicate that things could get much uglier in the coming months.

Hostile challenges were directed against established veterans' peace contingents in Veterans Day parades last fall, in Milwaukee, NYC and elsewhere. Iraq Veterans Against the War will evidently be a particular target. IVAW member Jimmy Massey was swift-boated for exposing war crimes committed by US troops in Iraq and Dave Airhart arrested for protesting a military recruiter at Kent State University.

Veterans get this special attention because a lot of the attacks on the anti-war/anti-occupation movement are based on appealing, primarily within the white section of the working class, to a spontaneous sense of class solidarity with those serving. Snobby liberals, this storyline goes, are attacking our brothers and sisters in the Armed Forces. The prominent presence of veterans and military families in our movement tends to fracture that myth. So does pointing out all the long-distance hawks — blood-thirsty politicians, Keyboard Kommando pundits and Young Republicans — who insist on "victory" no matter what it takes, as long as it doesn't take them or their kids.

Though attacks on the anti-war/anti-occupation movement will intensify, no matter what is flung at us by the advocates of the occupation and the US empire, it is they who are on the defensive. Every day the occupation falters a little more, every day the administration's credibility evaporates a little more, every day presents us with new opportunities to intensify the resistance. Let's do it.

NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Freedom Road Socialist Organization
Organización Socialista del Camino para la Libertad

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