

Iraq and Peace Movement Opportunities

By Paul Loeb | July 2003

In the glow of the Iraq war's initial military success, most American peace activists felt profoundly demoralized. Between the war being portrayed as a glamorous spectacle and Bush's seemingly overwhelming popular support, many who'd recently marched by the millions felt isolated, defensive, and powerless, fearing their voices no longer mattered.

Now, as Bush's occupation faces a deepening quagmire, shifting public sentiment opens up major new opportunities for activism. Just two months ago, the national mood felt so resistant that it was hard to raise the most cautious dissenting questions. But polls now suggest the beginning of a very different national mood, where large numbers of Americans are having significant doubts. This gives us a chance to challenge the core fallacies of Bush's foreign policy, revitalize peace movement activism, and perhaps change some of our national directions. We can do this by launching a grassroots campaign to replace the U.S. control over Iraq with an international transitional authority under United Nations command—an authority that would control not only military operations, but also Iraq's political and economic affairs, including its oil-fields. We can work to transform a beachhead for American empire into an interim government that would actually have a shot at bringing democracy.

The recent shifts in the polls are staggering. They open up major opportunities, even if most peace activists haven't yet recognized this. Driven by the steady U.S. casualties in Iraq and continuing chaos, a late June Gallup poll found 42% of Americans now believing things are going badly in Iraq, up from just 13% in early May. Only 56%, according to the same poll, now believe it was worth going to war in the first place, down from 73% in April. In a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll taken in mid-July, six in ten said the war damaged the image of the United States abroad, half said the conflict caused permanent damage to U.S. relations with key allies, and 52% considered the level of U.S. casualties "unacceptable." All this

was before Congress finally began acknowledging the occupation's political, economic, and human costs.

Before the war, we had something we could fight for—trying to stop it. When it finally began, this radically limited the peace movement's immediate possibilities. There was little we could do to influence its immediate outcome. All we could do was bear witness for the future. But now the landscape has shifted once again, to one far more hospitable toward dissenting views. Americans are developing significant reservations despite scant critical media coverage, no major peace actions since the end of February, and minimal questioning by Democratic leaders. If we can begin coalescing public concern around an alternative to U.S. troops remaining indefinitely in Iraq, we have a real chance to influence national debate.

Moving Beyond "I told you so."

Although the war has created precisely the kind of mess we predicted, we need to do more than just repeat, "I told you so," as the casualties continue to mount. Or gloat about how Bush's imperial dream is unraveling. We need to offer our own vision of what needs to be done, supporting the Europeans in pushing to end the current U.S. control of Iraq, and instead placing the country under UN charge, policing it with a multinational force that would include significant Islamic representation. If the U.S. were no longer calling the shots, this might even allow a process like that which occurred when UN forces finally ended the East Timor carnage and supervised that country's transition to democracy.

U.S. troops are now symbols of empire, colonialism, and chaos. The longer they stay, the more they



become targets, and the more Iraqis will resent the U.S. for imposing our will while failing to secure the basics of survival, like electricity, clean water, and physical safety. By contrast, administration by the United Nations—which represents the entire international community, including eighteen Arab states—is less likely to be seen as a foreign military occupation but a transitional administration and is therefore less likely to encourage armed opposition. Although the new forces will probably still face some opposition, they won't be tarred with the same neocolonial agenda. Iraqis won't view them as simply in it to control the oil or project American domination. Without the disruption of a growing armed insurgency, efforts at restoring basic services, maintaining stability, and setting up a democratic and representative Iraqi government would be far easier.

A shift away from unilateral U.S. control already has broad potential support. In a late-June Knowledge Network poll, 64% of Americans wanted the UN to take a leadership role in Iraq, up from 50% in April. Pushing for such a shift will also let us reach out to American soldiers who are increasingly frustrated at being given a mission with no defined end and no clear boundaries between friend and foe. And to military families angry that they see no clear timetable for the return of their loved ones. We might even work to replace Bush's chickenhawk bluster of "Bring them on," with our own call to "Bring them Home," so long as we make clear that we're arguing for something more than just abandoning Iraq to chaos.

Ideally, this campaign would be a broad-based effort through which citizens would reach out both in their communities and to elected officials. Citizens could gather petitions, write letters to local papers, meet with editorial boards and congressional representatives, table, canvass, and vigil in local neighborhoods, pass resolutions in local governmental and civic groups, and build toward major marches and rallies. In short, we can reach out through the same kinds of civic networks that were beginning to foster so much

national dialogue on the eve of the war. We'd work to make sure Iraq stays a front-and-center issue, in a way that builds on Bush's newfound vulnerability.

Once citizen groups got moving, they could then pressure key elected officials to take a stand, including Democratic presidential candidates and independent-minded Republicans. It will take work to get the more conservative Democratic presidential candidates and elected representatives to embrace this demand. But given the shifting polls, if we muster enough citizen pressure, at least a few will decide that

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the call to pull U.S. troops out is popular enough to risk embracing. We'd want to offer even the more conservative candidates and elected officials the opportunity to say: "I supported Bush in good faith, assuming the intelligence reports were correct, and that he would go in good

faith to enlist a broad coalition of support. I'm glad Saddam Hussein is out, but now that the evidence on the WMD's still hasn't surfaced, we're alienating the rest of the world, and the Iraqis want us out. It's time to stop putting our brave young soldiers at risk."

Could this campaign actually succeed in getting Bush to turn Iraq over to the UN? Assuming that the situation continues to be a morass, Bush will face increasing pressure to cut his losses, declare victory, and leave. Although some in his administration are ideologically opposed to any key UN role whatsoever, with enough citizen pressure and media debate the pragmatist wing might actually view withdrawal as politically preferable to being stuck with an increasingly unpopular occupation and daily death tolls. Republican leaders don't want to face an election year with American soldiers coming home from Iraq in body bags, week after week with no clear end in sight.

Trade-offs in the Campaign

This raises a difficult question. Is it the job of the peace movement—or the global community—to help Bush clean up the mess that he's created? Shouldn't we simply let him stew in it?

If we do succeed in convincing the Bush administration to immediately let the United Nations administer Iraq, it might increase his re-election prospects and those of members of Congress who supported the war. However, it's extremely unlikely that the administration will instantly accede to these demands. Powerful economic, strategic, and ideological motivations led to them to attack this oil-rich nation to begin with. These motivations make it extremely unlikely that they'll give up the opportunity to try to control Iraq's political and economic future without a fight. And the more they dig in their heels and resist, the more time the peace movement will have to expose the ways in which the U.S. invasion of Iraq was not about bringing freedom and democracy to a long-oppressed people, but about controlling the country and its natural resources, and exerting our unilateral will on the world. Forcing the U.S. to genuinely release its control over Iraq would be a major setback for the politics of empire.

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While arguing to bring the troops home, we'll also have a chance to address related questions, like the missing WMD's, America's long tradition of arming dictators, the key role of oil politics, and the lies and manipulations that fueled our rush to war—like the magnification of Saddam Hussein's threat, the notion that we'd be universally hailed as liberators, and the attacks on generals who accurately warned of massive post-war troop deployments. Raising these issues will lead to larger questions about the dangers of Bush's belligerent unilateralism, and the contrast between the \$4 billion a month he's spending in Iraq and his total neglect of a sinking domestic economy. The more we succeed in this task, the more we have a chance to breach Bush's image as a national protector.

In response to our arguments, the administration and its supporters will first insist that things are proceeding fine as they are, and then probably attack the very idea that the United Nations could do a better job. Such attacks against the UN will likely further

alienate much of the UN membership, including key American allies, and embolden them to pursue more independent foreign policies. This tactic is also likely to backfire here at home, given that public opinion polls suggest the U.S. still has broad support among U.S. citizens, and that increasing majorities lean toward exactly the solution we'll be pushing.

If Bush does eventually withdraw after sustained citizen pressure, his administration will have been significantly tarnished. And we'll have a major peace movement victory, which will itself empower further action. A key value of this campaign would be its ability to help recover activist momentum and morale—giving people concrete tasks where they feel their voices can be heard. This is critical. There's a huge reservoir of

citizens who became active in the opposition to the war, but who've since melted back to private life. If we can get them re-engaged at this point, they have a chance to become long-term activists. They may not yet have taken up the particular issue of troop withdrawal, but that's because most were so demoralized by the war's

quick initial progress and seemingly overwhelming support that they felt that what happened in Iraq was totally out of their hands. Now it isn't. Citizens once again can begin to have a voice, but in a far more potentially receptive environment.

Activists not Spectators

During the countdown to the war, the clock was running against us. Our movement grew at an amazing pace, but ran out of time before we could become powerful enough to reverse the administration's course. Now time should work in our favor. Unless Iraq suddenly becomes miraculously pacified, the longer our troops are in there, the more casualties they will take, and the stronger the case for withdrawal. Iraqi resistance is unlikely to die down, since the more houses we raid and civilians we round up the more resentment we stoke—which in a country as heavily armed as Iraq means more attacks on our soldiers. Bush is already calling for increased military deployments. Because the pressure should get greater

the longer our troops stay as occupiers, time is on our side now in a way that it wasn't during the period leading up to the war. We would want to start such a campaign quickly, however, because once we approach the 2004 elections much of the citizen energy we need to draw on will necessarily be diverted toward defeating Bush in the November election. But if we begin now, we can erode his standing enough to significantly increase our chances of doing this.

Finally, working to replacing U.S. control with a UN mandate is a sufficiently mainstream demand that it should allow us to reassemble the powerful coalitions created on the eve of the war. It will also exclude some of the crazier fringes who reject the United Nations as much as do the neoconservatives.

Whether or not we can actually convince the administration to pursue a wiser course, taking up this issue gives us the chance to get people moving again, challenge the core politics of empire, and support policies that would actually make for a safer world. It gives us the chance to do far more than watch from the sidelines as passive spectators.

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