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USA

Who are the control rods?

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After losing a war, one of the worst things that can happen to a society is for its people to be told it was a “victory.” The inability or failure to learn the lessons of the United States’ defeat in Iraq enables the plunge into the next disastrous adventure: Can you say “Iran”?

Is a U.S. and/or Israeli direct military attack on Iran really as imminent as recent reports might indicate? We think probably not, but the direction of events is ominous. Iran and Israel are engaged (“allegedly”) in mutual rounds of assassination. Elements of the Israeli intelligence and military establishments are waging either an open faction fight, or a strategic escalation of tension, through articles planted in the American press over the feasibility and timing of the coming war.

An important analysis by Moshe Machover sums up the Israeli regime calculus:

“(A) decision to ignite a war against Iran is not one that any Israeli leader would take lightly. There is a non-negligible risk that Israel would suffer many casualties...But in this case the prize is the highest possible one from a Zionist point of view: eliminating the demographic threat to the future of Israel as a Jewish ethnocracy [through a possible mass expulsion of the Palestinian population]. So Netanyahu will be sorely tempted to make a sacrifice of his own people for the greater national good.

“I assume that American policy-makers are aware of Israel’s special interest in a military denouement of the conflict with Iran, an interest not quite shared by the U.S. This is why they are worried, and issue stern warnings to Netanyahu and Barak — discreetly and behind the scenes, of course, because especially in this election year, when he will face Republican crazies, Obama cannot afford to appear pusillanimous.

“However, Netanyahu cannot flagrantly go ahead and start a war without U.S. approval. Therefore the most likely scenario is a series of provocations instigated by Israel, mostly by devious and covert means, in order to escalate the conflict and drag the U.S. by degrees into mission creep.” <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?....>

The danger of the U.S. population accepting a “drag into mission creep” would be much less if the lessons of Iraq were properly publicized. The reality of the defeat in Iraq is hardly obscure, since it took about 20 minutes after the last official U.S. combat troops crossed the border from Iraq into Kuwait for the Potemkin village of “Iraqi stability and democracy,” so carefully constructed during eight years of occupation, to fall apart.

President Obama, who inherited and chose to continue the war he had denounced as “stupid,” saluted the returning troops for bringing about a stable, free and democratic Iraq. Meanwhile the regime of prime minister Nouri al-Maliki brought a terrorism indictment against the vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi, who promptly headed north to autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan where the central government’s hand doesn’t reach.

Sunni and independent Shia political figures accuse al-Maliki of organizing a new dictatorship with the support of the United States, which is shipping billions of dollars in advanced weaponry to Iraq — ostensibly to defend against a possible Iranian threat, which may be slightly incongruous inasmuch as al-Maliki’s adversaries accuse him of acting as Teheran’s agent. Meanwhile, The New York Times (January 29, 2012) reported that the 11,000-person U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad is protected by 5,000 private military contractors, and “When embassy personnel move throughout the country, small helicopters buzz over the convoys to provide support in case of an attack. Often, two contractors armed with machine guns are tethered to the outside of the helicopters.”

Will Iraq's fragile political system collapse entirely? That's hard to predict, but the people of that "liberated" country are probably pretty realistic about what they're facing. After some hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, the devastation of war and the humiliation of an eight-year occupation, the hideous tyranny of Saddam Hussein has been replaced by the prospect of endless sectarian bloodshed in which, among other ruinous developments, Iraq becomes a proxy battleground between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Losing At Home

Among the war's other losers, however, are those from whom the truth is hidden — the people of the United States. Although we obviously haven't suffered anything resembling the physical destruction and the mass death that imperialism inflicted on Iraq, the deaths of over 4000 troops and the horrific lifelong injuries suffered by tens of thousands of others are a sickening enough waste.

It's necessary for the antiwar movement to state the truth clearly: This was a criminal war, which the United States lost. Just compare the results with what the Bush-Cheney gang promised at the outset: those fantasies about a liberated democratic Iraq, allied with the United States and its war partners, whose reconstruction would be self-financed by its oil money.

Perhaps the biggest lie about Iraq wasn't the Weapons of Mass Destruction fraud — after all, imperialist adventures of the past have also been launched on lying pretexts from "Remember the Maine" (1898) to the mythical Gulf of Tonkin incident (1964). The big fraud was telling the U.S. population that this war didn't have to be paid for, that in fact taxes could be cut in wartime.

We've paid for it, all right — and we'll be paying for decades to come, somewhere upwards of four trillion dollars by some estimates once the full costs of treating physically and emotionally ravaged veterans are counted. But neither the Bush-Cheney neoconservative gangsters who launched the war, nor the Obama administration that inherited it, are going to tell the truth about this defeat.

In fact, the stage for U.S. defeat in Iraq was set early in the occupation, between 2004 when U.S. forces destroyed the city of Fallujah and 2006, by which point the reality of civil war among Iraqi factions couldn't be denied. Juan Cole looks back to a decisive turning point:

"It turns out that the day on which the U.S. military lost Iraq once and for all was September 16, 2007, when Blackwater private security guards, all decorated ex-military, opened fire in Nisoor Square under the mistaken impression that they were under attack by the ordinary civilian motorists there. 17 were killed, dozens wounded, and the incident became a cause celebre for Iraqis eager to see an end to a foreign military presence in their country. That the U.S. courts declined to punish the perpetrators of the massacre was a nail in the coffin for extraterritoriality. The Iraqis wouldn't grant it after all that.

"... The U.S. will receive no benefit from its illegal war of aggression, no permanent bases, no bulwark against Iran, no new Arab friend to Israel, no \$14 a barrel petroleum — all thing things Washington had dreamed of. Dreams that turned out to be flimsy and unsubstantial and tragic."

Along then came "the surge," billed by Bush and subsequently by president Obama as the new strategy for victory. In reality, this was a salvage operation to halt the slide toward the complete disintegration of Iraq — and it worked, in the sense that "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia" was suppressed (before the U.S. invasion, of course, it had never existed)

and the cooperation of Sunni forces was purchased.

In this period U.S. political-military strategy essentially switched gears, away from Paul Bremer's and Paul Wolfowitz's ideologically driven post-invasion scheme of forcing massive "de-Baathification" and dissolving the Iraqi army that plunged the country into chaos. The "surge" was based on a more "classic" colonial mode of buying the support of the indigenous (so-called tribal) elites. That strategy brought about a rough political compromise and allowed the holding of halfway credible Iraqi elections and the formation of a coalition government.

That's the arrangement that has come unglued as American combat troops departed "as everyone in Iraq knew they eventually must. The remaining cohorts of U.S. military "contractors" in Iraq make the situation messier, but don't change the political equation.

And Then Comes Iran

If the peoples of both the invaded and invading countries lost, then who won? The only clear winner has been the regime in Iran, which saw its main enemy Saddam Hussein disappear from the map. The Iranian regime, we now know, quietly offered back in 2003 to deal with the United States for a comprehensive regional bargain. The Bush-Cheney regime, with Iran next on its hit list, contemptuously refused "and that opens another chapter to today's looming tragedy and imperial disaster.

In the coming year, Barack Obama "who was elected in part because he had opposed the Iraq war, and once in office embraced it" will take the Republicans' heat for "losing Iraq." If this seems like one of those absurdities of domestic politics, of course it is "but that was an inevitable outcome of president Obama's deal with the devil. And this comes at the time when the dysfunctional mutual co-dependent U.S. relationship with the military and intelligence apparatus of Pakistan has made the Afghanistan war the next inevitable loser for U.S. imperialism. (This reality is explored by Adaner Usmani in this issue of *Against the Current*.)

Most dangerous of all, perhaps "because the truth of the U.S. defeat in Iraq is hidden by the bipartisan agreement of the Republicans and Democrats, and because the entire destructive record of intervention in Afghanistan is conveniently all but forgotten so that the lessons of the past 30 years remain unlearned" there is far too little public understanding today of Washington's slide toward confrontation with Iran.

The pretext for U.S.-European sanctions and the step-by-step embargo of Iranian oil, of course, is the Iranian regime's alleged drive for nuclear weapons. But that's at most a secondary issue: The real imperial objective would be the destruction of Iran's conventional military capability that makes it a strong regional power. This is not achievable merely by air power or computer worms or Special Forces strike teams; it entails a major military operation on land as well as sea.

To repeat the point from Moshe Machover: There is no way that Israel can launch a war with Iran on its own, despite the eager encouragement from some desperate neoconservative and evangelical nutcases for an Israeli strike to force the United States to take the plunge.

As for the Iranian rulers closing the Strait of Hormuz, that's a deterrent threat rather than an imminent scenario. Such an attempt would make sense only in the extreme case of an imperialist physical blockade of Iranian oil shipments (which would be in international law an act of war to which Iran would be entitled to respond). Absent that level of aggression the Iranian rulers, detested by much of the population, are engaging in their own brand of rhetorical

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bluster, no doubt related to their internal factional battles.

From Washington's side, it's hardly likely that the Obama administration in an election year would launch an action that would cause a big oil price shock and expose U.S. interests in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf to covert Iranian retaliation. Even the Bush-Cheney gang, who undoubtedly intended to make Iran the central target in their Middle East war adventure, had to shelve those plans as they choked on Iraq.

In the medium and longer term, the Israeli tactical game is evidently to provoke some Iranian response that would force the United States prematurely into a confrontation that the Obama administration "at this stage" clearly does not want. The revelations that Israeli agents have posed as the CIA to recruit al-Qaeda-type terrorists (the Jundullah group) to carry out assassinations in Iran, is a window onto this deadly game. The temperature of the crisis, both real and manipulated, could begin to rise beyond the control of the participants, just as a nuclear reactor may "go critical" as the result of accidents and miscalculations.

To prevent catastrophic meltdown in a nuclear reactor, there are control rods that supposed to stop the chain reaction. In the face of a war drive, it's the people who must become the "control rods." The American people are already sick of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. If the full costs and outcomes of these wars were understood, popular opposition to this looming new adventure would be overwhelming.

The path away from destruction requires a nuclear-free Middle East, in a nuclear-free world. For the antiwar movement, for Occupy activists "indeed for any voices of sanity in our country" getting these realities into the political debate could hardly be more critical now.

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