

An Occupied Country

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ABSTRACT

It has become clear, very quickly, that Iraq is not a liberated country, but an occupied country.

We became familiar with the term “occupied country” during World War II. We talked of German-occupied France, German-occupied Europe. And after the war we spoke of Soviet-occupied Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Eastern Europe. It was the Nazis, the Soviets, who occupied other countries. We liberated them from occupation.

Now we are the occupiers. True we liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein, but not from us. Just as in 1898 we liberated Cuba from Spain, but not from us. Spanish tyranny was overthrown, but the United States established a military base in Cuba, as we are doing in Iraq. U.S. corporations moved in to Cuba, just as Bechtel and Halliburton and the oil corporations are moving into Iraq. The U.S. was deciding what kind of Constitution Cuba would have, just as our government is now forming a constitution for Iraq. Not a liberation. An occupation.

And it is an ugly occupation. On August 7, the NY Times reported that U.S. General Sanchez in Baghdad was worried about Iraqi

reaction to the occupation. Iraqi leaders who were pro-American were giving him a message, as he put it: “when you take a father in front of his family and put a bag over his head and put him on the ground you have had a significant adverse effect on his dignity and respect in the eyes of his family.” (That’s very perceptive)

CBS News reported on July 19: “Amnesty International is looking into a number of cases of suspected torture in Iraq by American authorities. One such case involves Khraisan al-Aballi. Al-Aballi’s house was razed by American soldiers, who came in shooting and arrested him and his 80-year old father. They shot and wounded his brother... The three men were taken away... Khraisan says his interrogators stripped him naked and kept him awake for more than a week, either standing or on his knees, bound hand and foot, with a bag over his head. Khraisan said he told his captors ‘I don’t know what you want. I don’t know what you want. I have nothing.’ ‘I asked them to kill me’ says Khraisan. After eight days, they let him and his father go... U.S. officials did not respond to repeated requests to discuss the case...’ We are in fact, carrying out our international obligations, which I’m satisfied we are

doing' said Paul Bremer, the U.S. administrator of Iraq."

June 16, two reporters for the Knight-Rider chain wrote: about the Faluji area: "In dozens of interviews during the past five days, most residents across the area said there was no Baathist or Sunni conspiracy against U.S. soldiers, there were only people ready to fight because their relatives had been hurt or killed, or they themselves had been humiliated by home searches and road stops... One woman said, after her husband was taken from their home because of empty wooden crates which they had bought for firewood, that the United States is guilty of terrorism."

According to the same reporters, "residents in At Agilia - a village north of Baghdad - said two of their farmers and five others from another village were killed when U.S. soldiers shot them while they were watering their fields of sunflowers, tomatoes, and cucumbers."

The ancient city of Ur, 6000 years old, reports the London Observer, has been pillaged by the occupying army. Alongside an ancient pyramid, which people from all over the world come to see, a military base has been established.

Soldiers who are set down in a country where they were told they would be welcomed as liberators and find they are surrounded by a hostile population become fearful, trigger-happy, and unhappy. We've been reading the reports of GIs angry at their being kept in Iraq. In mid-July, an ABC News reporter in Iraq tells of being pulled aside by a sergeant who said to him: "I've got my own 'Most Wanted List'. 'He was referring to the deck of cards the U.S. government published, featuring Saddam Hussein, his sons and other wanted members of the former Iraqi regime. 'The aces in my deck [he said] are Paul Bremer, Donald Rumsfeld, George Bush and Paul Wolfowitz.'"

Such sentiments are becoming known to the American public. In May, a Gallup Poll reported that only 13% of the American public

thought the war was going badly. By July 4th, the figure was 42%.

More ominous, perhaps, than the occupation of Iraq, is the occupation of the United States. I wake up in the morning, read the newspaper, and feel that we are an occupied country, that some alien group has taken over. Those Mexican workers trying to cross the border - dying in the attempt to evade immigration officials (ironically, trying to cross into land taken from Mexico by the United States in 1848) - those Mexican workers are not alien to me. Those 20 million people in this country who are not citizens and therefore, by the Patriot Act, are subject to being pulled out of their homes and held indefinitely by the FBI, with no constitutional rights - those people are not alien to me. But this small group of men who have taken power in Washington, they are alien to me.

I wake up thinking: this country is in the grip of a president who was not elected, who has surrounded himself with thugs in suits who care nothing about human life abroad or here, who care nothing about freedom abroad or here, who care nothing about what happens to the earth, the water, the air, what kind of world will be inherited by our children and grandchildren.

More Americans are beginning to feel, like the soldiers in Iraq, that something is terribly wrong, that this is not what we want our country to be. More and more every day, the lies are being exposed. And then there is the largest lie - that everything the United States does is to be pardoned because we are engaged in a "war on terrorism" - ignoring the fact that war is itself terrorism, that the barging into people's homes and taking away family members and subjecting them to torture, that is terrorism, that invading and bombing other countries does not give us more security but less security.

You get some sense of what this government means by the "war on terrorism" when you examine what Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld

(one of those faces on the sergeant's "most wanted" list) said a year ago when he was addressing the NATO ministers in Brussels. He was explaining the threats to the West (imagine - we are still talking of "the West" as some holy entity, as if the United States, having alienated most of the Western countries, was not now wooing Eastern countries, and trying persuade non-Western countries that we want only to liberate them). Rumsfeld, explaining the "threats" to the West and why they are invisible and unidentifiable said:

"There are things that we know. And then there are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know that we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know... that is, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence... simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist."

Well, Rumsfeld has clarified things for us. That explains why this government, not knowing exactly where to find the criminals of Sept. 11 will just go ahead and invade and bomb Afghanistan, killing thousands of people, driving hundreds of thousands from their homes, and still not know where the criminals are. That explains why the government, not really knowing what weapons Saddam Hussein is hiding, will invade and bomb Iraq, to the horror of most of the world, killing thousands of civilians and soldiers and terrorizing the population. That explains why the government, not knowing who are terrorists and who are not, will put hundreds of people in confinement at Guantanamo under such conditions that eighteen have tried to commit suicide. That explains why, not knowing which non-citizens are terrorists, the Attorney General will take away the constitutional rights of 20 million of them.

The so-called "war on terrorism" is not only a war on innocent people in other countries, but is a war on the people of the United States. A war on our liberties, a war on our standard of living. The wealth of the country is being stolen from the people and handed over to the super-rich. The lives of our young

are being stolen

It's been interesting to me that polls taken among African-Americans have shown consistently 60% opposition to the war in Iraq. I did a phone interview about the war with an African-American radio station in Washington DC, a program called "GW on the Hill", After I talked with the host there were eight callers. Colin Powell had just given his speech to the United Nations about Weapons of Mass Destruction. I took notes on what the callers said:

John: *"What Powell said was 'political garbage'"*

Another caller: *"Powell was just playing the game. That's what happens when people get into high office."*

Robert: *"If we go to war, innocent people will die for no good reason."*

Kareen: *"What Powell said was hogwash... War will not be good for this country."*

Susan: *"What is so good about being a powerful country?"*

Terry: *"It's all about oil."*

Another caller: *"The US is in search of an Empire and it will fall as the Romans did. Remember when Ali fought Foreman. He seemed asleep but when he woke up he was ferocious. So will the people wake up."*

It will become more and more clear that the casualties of war are not just abroad, but here. It is often said that they can get away with war because unlike Vietnam, the casualties are few. True, only a few hundred battle casualties, unlike Vietnam. But battle casualties are not all. When wars end, the casualties keep mounting up - sickness, trauma. After the Vietnam war, veterans reported birth defects in their families due to the Agent Orange spraying in Vietnam.

In the first Gulf War there were only a few hundred battle casualties, but the Veterans Administration reported recently that in the ten years following the Gulf War, 8000 veterans

died. Two hundred thousand of the 600,000 veterans of the Gulf War filed complaints about illnesses, diseases incurred from the weapons our government used in the war. We have yet to see the effects, in the current war, of depleted uranium and other deadly weapons, on the young men and women sent there.

What is our job? To point all this out. Our faith is that human beings only support violence and terror when they have been lied to. And when they learn the truth - as happened in the course of the Vietnam war - they will turn against the government.

We have the support of the rest of the world. The United States cannot indefinitely ignore the ten million people who protested around the world on February 15. The power of government - whatever weapons it possesses, whatever money it has at its disposal - is fragile. When it loses its legitimacy in the eyes of its people, its days are numbered.

We need to engage in whatever actions appeal to us. There is no act too small, no act too bold. The history of social change is the history of millions of actions, small and large, coming together at certain points in history and creating a power which governments cannot suppress.

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