

A Strategy for Ending the Iraq War

By Tom Hayden | July 13, 2005

“When you’re in the middle of a conflict, you’re trying to find pillars of strength to lean on.”

- US military officer, Iraq , May 19, 2005 .

In January 2005, a group of fifty peace activists from the Vietnam and Iraq eras issued a global appeal to end the war (online at <http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/20996/>). The appeal proposed undermining the pillars of war (public opinion, funding, troop recruitment, international allies) and building the pillars of peace and justice (an independent anti-war movement linked to justice issues, a progressive Democratic opposition, soldiers and families against the war, a global network to stop the US empire). This is an update on implementation of the strategy.

Overview

The tide is turning. Public support for the war is down, as are the President’s ratings. Anti-war Democrats are back. Military recruiting is hitting a wall. The US strategy of Iraqization is failing. National anti-war actions are scheduled for late September. The bad news is that the good news is so recent. For six long months, the media and the Democrats have given the President a free pass, and the anti-war movement has floundered. The war is not over - we should remember that the Vietnam War continued for seven years after President Johnson was forced to resign.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Among friends and local activists, practice discussion of these multiple scenarios with plans for responding to each:

1. Status Quo/Quagmire. How do we expand local anti-war coalitions, and double membership of local groups, going into the 2006 elections?
2. Bush escalates (e.g. sends more troops, invades Syrian border, bombs Iran , resumes draft). In any of these cases, is more radical action called for? How will it impose a cost on Bush, how will it expand the movement?
3. Bush mimics Nixon, promises peace, withdraws 10,000 troops as Iraq adopts constitution and elects new government. Would this defuse the anti-war movement going into 2006? Or will we be in a mode to keep on the offense? How will we argue that the strategy will not bring peace?
4. What do you need to respond? In each scenario, what resources or adaptations does your local group need to respond?

Analysis of the current situation

On the battlefield: a sinking quagmire

It is risky to base an analysis on battlefield reports, especially given the Pentagon’s propaganda, the media’s limitations, and the general lack of information about the Iraqi insurgency. Anything is possible, but clearly a sense of panic has set in among Washington decision-makers since the installation of the new Iraqi client regime a few months ago. For example, Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel says the war is being lost (NYT, June 21). Baghdad is “effectively enemy territory, with an ability to strike at will, and to shake off the losses inflicted by American troops.” (NYT, January 20, 2005) Military analysts recognize that the US cannot hold the territory it occupies. The airport road remains a nightmare. These are the classic contradictions of an occupying power trying to prop up an unpopular regime against a nationalist-based resistance. The training and deployment of Iraqi counter-insurgency troops (Iraqization) has failed so far, with US commanders saying it will take several years. “American troops have been conducting nighttime patrols to make sure the Iraqis stay awake”, according to an unusually candid front-page New York Times article (June 19). Sen. Biden was informed privately that of 107 Iraqi battalions, only three were fully-operational (June 6).

Against all evidence, however, senior correspondents like the Times’ John Burns continue to see the war through the filters of previous conflicts. Burns calls the Syrian-Iraqi border a new “Ho Chi Minh Trail”, ignoring the fact that there is no North Vietnam , no China , no Soviet Union serving as a “rear base” for the insurgents, but inadvertently lending support to the argument that the US should send more troops to seal the border. More unfortunately, Burns has penned an opinion piece called “The Mystery of the Insurgency” (May 15) which says “counter-insurgency experts are baffled.” Sounding like Mr. Kurtz in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Burns cannot simply conclude that the US invasion itself is the cause of a fiery Iraqi nationalism, because that would imply that US withdrawal might lessen the violence.

Perhaps the most significant factor on the ground is the rise of an Iraqi movement calling for US withdrawal and ending the occupation. The peace movement should consider calling for US peace talks with the Iraqi peace movement.

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In January of this year, a Brookings Institute report showed 82 percent of Sunnis and 69 percent of Shiites favored a “near-term US withdrawal” (NYT, Feb. 21, 2005). Just before the Iraqi elections, US intelligence warned that the winning faction would press for a withdrawal date. (NYT, Jan. 19, 2005). This was considered “grim” news and efforts were taken to squelch the peace sentiment. Next Harith al-Dari, a prominent Sunni cleric, along with the Muslim Scholars Association, called for a US withdrawal timetable, saying “We do not insist that the Americans withdraw at once, as long as they stay in their bases and cease to marginalize our political life.” (NYT, March 29, 2005) Then 100,000 Iraqi Shiites, the winners in the election, demonstrated on the streets of Baghdad calling for US withdrawal. (NYT, April 10). A few days later, the leader of a “hard-line” Sunni group “who says he has links with insurgent fighters” was rebuffed when he tried for weeks to open talks with American officials on behalf of the insurgents. (NYT, April 15, 2005).

The only conclusion one can draw from these scattered reports is that the Bush Administration is threatened by any peace sentiment among Iraqis before the US somehow defeats the insurgents. This leaves an opportunity for anti-war critics to call for cease-fire talks (publicly and back-channel) in support of the Iraqi majority. Many guerrilla conflicts have been suspended when the guerrillas’ legitimate demands were recognized as part of a political process. Secretary of State Rice seeks “inclusiveness” by inviting fifteen token Sunnis to the table while the US military occupies their neighborhoods. Instead she must understand “inclusiveness” to mean the inclusion of the majority of Iraqis who will at least tolerate the insurgency until the US agrees to end the occupation.

The US may be missing an opportunity for back-channel talks about guarantees that the withdrawal will be peaceful, that oil supplies will be protected, and that Israel will not be attacked from Baghdad . No one can know - but Secretary Rumsfeld is proud of saying “we have no exit strategy, only a victory strategy.” (NYT, April 13, 2005) That’s what Americans in Saigon kept saying until they were jumping on helicopters from rooftops in 1975. The possibility cannot be discounted that the Green Zone will be attacked and overrun in an offensive like that in Saigon in January 1968. What then?

The US Military Recruitment Crisis Deepens

The single greatest achievement of the anti-war movement is the pressure on military recruitment as well as support for dissenting GIs. The previous generation of anti-war activists forced an end to the draft, which may be an obstacle too great for the President to surmount. That earlier generation has become the parents of this generation’s draft-age youth, a fact which deeply disturbs a Pentagon hoping to eradicate “the Vietnam Syndrome.”

“The Pentagon is especially vexed by a generation of more activist parents who have no qualms about projecting their own views onto their children.” (NYT, “Parents Emerging as Military Recruiters’ Big Obstacle”) See also: on recruitment “death spiral”, NYT, May 13, 2005; “Army Recruiters Say They Feel Pressure To Bend the Rules”, NYT, May 3, 2005; “Army Recruiting More High School Dropouts to Meet Goals”, NYT, June 11, 2005. And then there’s this: at least 37 Army recruiters have gone AWOL since October 2002, NYT, Mar. 27, 2005)

The recruitment crisis is connected to a morale crisis on the battlefield itself. The first fragging (and killing) of American officers since the 2003 invasion was reported last week.

“Coalition of the Willing” Weakens

You might not know it from the media, but the “coalition” having troops on the ground in Iraq has declined from 34 to 20 nations. The US’ two staunchest allies, Britain’s Blair and Italy’s Berlusconi, suffered politically in recent elections due to their pro-war stances. And the last paragraph of a New York Times article datelined Baghdad on March 13 reported that Ukraine was pulling out its 150 troops by October. It’s not just the “old Europe” that is opposed to sending troops, but America’s very own new allies inside the former Soviet Union.

Second to the US in troop commitments is not a government or country at all, but the 20,000 stateless mercenaries from former repressive armies in South Africa, El Salvador, Colombia, the US and the UK, all paid for by American taxpayers. (LAT, June 11, 2005).

“Coalition of the Willing” allies like Pakistan and Uzbekistan are increasingly in the news for torture and other human rights violations, drawing fire from concerned Congressmen who question whether the US trained those responsible for the recent massacre of hundreds in Uzbekistan, where terror suspects have been “rendered” by the US. (NYT, May 29, 2005)

Little noticed is that the US alliances in the war on terrorism are provoking violence elsewhere. For example, one thousand US troops are training African countries to combat terrorism to “get ahead of the power curve”, which has led to an Algerian attack killing 15 Mauritians who were denounced as “agents of America in the region.” (June 10, 2005). The secret low-intensity warfare continues, provoking more anti-American hatred across the Islamic world.

Finally, Congress Wakes Up

The leadership of the Democratic Party - Reid, Pelosi, even Howard Dean - has been absolutely AWOL during the past six months, driving local Democrats and activists to despair and confusion. Thanks to local activists and Progressive Democrats

of America (PDA), Democratic conventions in California , Wisconsin and Massachusetts , passed anti-war resolutions at their conventions. But the party line was to dissociate from the Iraq issue altogether, stranding a courageous handful like representatives Lynn Woolsey and Barbara Lee who offered a withdrawal resolution in late January.

All that changed last week. The doves have found their wings. Rep. John Conyers led important hearings on the Downing Street Memoranda which showed top Bush officials were "fixing the evidence to fit the policy." Over one hundred Democrats, including Pelosi, signed Conyers' letter demanding answers from the Administration. Five hundred thousand petitions were carried by Conyers and others to the White House. Maxine Waters led a rebellion against Pelosi behind closed doors which resulted in the formation of a fifty-member "Out of Iraq" caucus. Five House Republicans broke ranks from the Administration for the first time, including the North Carolina Congressman who once proposed renaming French fries "freedom fries." The Congress voted to protect public libraries from the Patriot Act.

An emboldened anti-war movement plans national actions for September 24. Moveon.org, which was AWOL for months, tending to follow opinion rather than lead, joined the Conyers effort to solicit petitions from its members. Win Without War, similarly dormant for months, scheduled meetings and press conferences enthusiastically. The United for Peace and Justice official working group on pressuring Congress will hold its first meeting next week.

The grass-roots anger directed at the party leadership was having an effect, as reported by many members after visiting their constituencies. Public opinion was running sixty percent in favor of partial or total withdrawal. Hundreds of Iraqis and Americans had been killed since the installation of the new Iraqi government. The Downing Street documents proved once again that the reasons for war were fabricated. The Abu Ghraib scandals were destroying the reputation of the Pentagon. Bush was declining in the polls. And so the politicians decided to show up.

All cynicism aside, that is great news. The climate has changed, at least for now. The rank-and-file of the anti-war movement have an opportunity to move Congress from fence-sitting to forward motion.

A major moral force all along has been the military families, who unswervingly insist on accountability from the Administration and will not quit whatever the ups and downs of the war's course. It has to be recognized strategically that ending the war will require a left-right alliance. Those in the centrist establishment tend to be blinded to reality by their power, which results in muddled analysis and rhetoric (an explanation for Senator Biden, Senator Kerry, or the New York Times editorial

writers). For example, when the library amendment to the Patriot Act passed with 38 Republican votes, one House strategist complained of "the crazies on the left and the crazies on the right, meeting in the middle." (Washington Post, June 16, 2005).

The anti-war groups now will confer on how to deepen grass-root organizing in selected congressional districts around withdrawal, ending taxes for torture, military recruiting, etc. A key issue will be the costs of the war, easily available on www.costofwar.com on city, state, and federal levels. For example, the up-to-the-second total cost of the war now is \$178,136,219,056 (that actually was thirty minutes ago). That's one billion dollars per week. These same funds could have purchased:

- nationally, health insurance for 46.4 million people, or Head Start enrollments for 27 million kids, or 8.6 million four-year college scholarships, or 3.5 million new elementary teachers, or seven years of fully-funded global anti-hunger efforts;

- the portion paid by Los Angeles taxpayers would fund 91,851 four-year public university scholarships.

Carry those facts to the congressional district offices, PTA meetings and recruitment centers, and there will be effects. Some activists are discussing the construction of Iraq-style prison cages outside of congressional and/or recruitment offices - and leafleting passers-by from the inside. The tactical possibilities are endless.

Not only can the war's end be hastened, but beyond the left-right alliance, the peace movement can contribute to the reconstruction of a locally-grounded new progressive movement conscious of the links between empire and domestic priorities. This would be a historical development of lasting importance. For example, from the Vietnam experience came an American public suspicion of plans to police the world and executive secrecy that lasted beyond Watergate until human rights became an accepted principle of American policy. The same progressive momentum can be achieved through the ending of the Iraq war; in fact, it already has begun.

A Note of Caution

Unfortunately, the anti-war movement depends on the costly quagmire continuing in Iraq . Americans become frustrated at the sight of failure on television, failure coming home in coffins, failure of politicians to tell the truth. They are not against forcing a Saddam Hussein from power, even by questionable methods. They are not against using force and violence if they feel threatened or if the cause seems just. And by definition, they cannot oppose secret wars that go unreported on television.

Thus, Iraq is a moment of illumination that may not come again soon. It is on television as long as Americans are dying. It can also illuminate how power works in this country for this post-Vietnam generation.

So what will Karl Rove do?

He can escalate, de-escalate, or wait and see if the insurgency wears down and the Iraqis adopt a constitution and elect a government. It is no accident that the Administration's current (public) blueprint ends in December, the beginning of the 2006 American election year. While Rove mulls the options, the peace movement should be undertaking an exercise in grass-roots scenario planning so that activists are prepared for any eventuality. (see proposal above)

For perspective, here are some facts from the Vietnam era, all drawn from historians George Herring and Chester Poch in 1968, *The World Transformed*.

After the Tet Offensive in January 1968, President Johnson dismissed the impact to reporters by joking that "there may have been a sergeant asleep with a beer in his hand and his zipper open, or a man in a jeep with a woman in his lap." Privately, however, the Administration was going nuts. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs disclosed that an American defeat "was a very near thing", that rural pacification efforts were destroyed, and that part of the countryside had fallen into enemy hands. The White House organized a "progress campaign" to target the media and public opinion with good news. For example, they deliberately under-estimated enemy combat strength by 120,000. By November 1967 fifty-one percent of the American people still believed the US was making progress. By January 1968, LBJ's critics outnumbered supporters by 47 to 39 percent. But the combination of the presidential campaigns of Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and the Tet Offensive resulted in the President sending Robert McNamara, the Wolfowitz of his era, off to the World Bank, and a few weeks later Johnson offered his resignation. But the war continued for seven more years, during which time a majority of its casualties were inflicted.

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How this could have happened is another story, having to do with divisions in the anti-war opposition and the machinations of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. History, in other words, could repeat itself in Iraq .

Hopefully this scenario is wrong, but it is important always to hope for the best and plan for the worst.

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