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by Anthony Arnove

We find ourselves in a remarkable situation today. A majority of people in the United States now believe the invasion of Iraq was not worth the consequences, including (as of today) the death of more than 1,530 soldiers in Iraq.

The official justifications for the war have been exposed as complete fallacies. No one found any weapons of mass destruction or evidence of ties between the Iraqi government at the attacks of September 11. The occupation has not paid for itself, as Paul Wolfowitz suggested it would. And U.S. soldiers have not been greeted as liberators by the Iraqi people.

Meanwhile, more Iraqis today are imprisoned than at any point during the occupation — many of them still in the notorious Abu-Ghraib prison, where some of the worst instances of prison torture have been exposed, but which is by no means unique. Some 9,000 Iraqis are being detained, according to official government figures, though more are being held secretly, beyond the reach of any human rights monitors. A study in the respected British medical journal *Lancet* found that perhaps as many as 98,000 “excess deaths” have occurred in Iraq as a result of the invasion. Electricity supply remains below even the levels that existed before the invasion, when Iraq was under severe sanctions. Unemployment, internal displacement, and lack of access to safe drinking water remain profound problems. People continue to be humiliated and abused in violent house-to-house searches being conducted by the U.S. military, sometimes accompanied by its local proxies. Iraqis are killed routinely, with complete impunity, at checkpoints, in their homes, in detention facilities, but U.S. soldiers who have committed these crimes — and, more importantly, the officials responsible for them — have in almost every instance gone completely unpunished.

And yet many people who opposed this unjust invasion, who opposed sanctions on Iraq for years before that, now suggest the U.S. military should remain in Iraq *for the benefit of the Iraqi people*. Thus, we confront the strange situation of the antiwar movement mobilizing against an unjust invasion and then supporting the military occupation that flows directly from it. It’s an incoherent position, and one I think we have to reject.

Not having found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq — the first big lie of the invasion — the United States has turned to a new big lie: George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, John Negroponte, Condoleezza Rice, and their friends are bringing democracy to the Iraqi people.

But democracy has nothing to do with why the United States is in Iraq. The Bush administration invaded Iraq for reasons of power politics having to do with long-established imperial interests in the Middle East. The reasons Washington invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein are the same reasons they backed Saddam Hussein as he carried out the worst of his crimes against the Iraqi people, the Kurds, and Iranians (crimes that were later used to justify going to war against him in 1991 and removing him from power in 2003).

Iraq has the world's second-largest oil reserves and is in the heart of a region that has two-thirds of global oil reserves. The United States has recognized for decades that control over Middle Eastern energy resources is a prerequisite for U.S. global hegemony, that is, that U.S. global hegemony depends on regional hegemony in the Middle East.

The centrality of oil to U.S. imperial calculations has only increased since it first sought to replace the British and French as the outside power controlling the region's energy resources. U.S. economic, military, and political competitors in Europe and Asia, particularly China and India, need to greatly increase their energy imports from the Middle East and in fact, are proportionally far more dependent on oil from the region than is the United States, which gets most of its oil from its own reserves, from Canada, Venezuela, and other sources closer to home. Thus there is increasing competition over control of oil, oil pipelines, and oil shipping routes.

As the Bush administration document *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* clearly laid out in September 2002, the United States will not allow the emergence of any even potential peer competitor to the United States, seeking to preserve the massive gap between itself and other powers.

By invading Iraq, Washington hoped not only to install a regime more favorable to U.S. oil interests, it hoped to establish military bases in Iraq and to use Iraq as a staging ground for further interventions to

redraw the map of the Middle East. As many as fourteen U.S. bases have been established in Iraq and are likely to remain long after U.S. troops are expelled, and the largest U.S. embassy in the world today is in Baghdad.

This has nothing to do with democracy. In fact, it's worth reminding ourselves that the U.S. has long been a major obstacle to any secular, democratic, nationalist, or socialist movement in the region that stood for democratic change, preferring instead what is euphemistically called "stability," even if it meant aligning with the most reactionary statist or fundamentalist religious forces. This led it to align not only with an expansionist Israel, to defend Israel's occupation and settlement of Palestinian lands, and to allow Israel to develop nuclear weapons. It led to the United States to support the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran 1953 and to arm and befriend the repressive regime of the Shah that replaced him. And of course the U.S. has historically backed and continues to back the royal families of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

The U.S. opposes genuine democracy in the Middle East for a simple reason: if ordinary people controlled the region's energy resources, they might be put toward economic development and social needs, rather than going to fuel the profits of Western oil companies.

That is why the U.S. occupation authorities passed more than 100 regulations that will outlive the occupation, imposing neoliberalism and austerity measures on whatever government comes to power. These involved opening every aspect of Iraq's economy other than oil to 100 percent foreign ownership, retaining the anti-worker trade union laws of the Hussein regime, lowering taxes on corporations to levels only dreamed about by U.S. war profiteers, and ensuring that oil, while not immediately turned over to 100 percent foreign ownership, will be de facto controlled by private companies and dominated by the Western oil giants. The *New York Times* economics columnist Jeff Madrick said the plans for Iraq are likely to cause, in his words, "widespread cruelty."

"But by almost any mainstream economist's standard," Madrick writes:

the plan . . . is extreme — in fact, stunning. It would immediately make Iraq's economy one of the most open to trade and capital flows in the world, and put it among the lowest taxed in the world,

rich or poor. . . . The new plan reduces the top personal income and corporate tax rate to only 15 percent. It reduces tariffs on imports to 5 percent. And it abolishes almost all restrictions on foreign investment. It would allow a handful of foreign banks to take over the domestic banking system.

These neoliberal reforms have nothing to do with democracy or helping the Iraqi people.

And it's not just antiwar activists in the United States or elsewhere in the world that have reached this understanding. Soldiers are returning from Iraq and writing home describing their horror at the treatment of the Iraqi people whom they were told they were supposed to be liberating. Reservists are refusing to be sent to Iraq for an unjust war. As one member of the Texas Army National Guard seeking conscientious objector status said on Democracy Now! March 15:

I believe it's an unjust war on our part. I do not believe what the government has told us the war is intended for. I do not believe this government intends to spread democracy in the Middle East. It's not in the interest of their security or our security. I believe it is all about oil and profits, or if not that, it's about . . . controlling a strategic part of the land in the Middle East. And I don't want to fight for that.

Another soldier also applying for C.O. status, after fighting in Iraq from March 2003 to March 2004, said on the same program:

[W]hen I first went to Iraq, I actually believed what the government was saying, that we were searching for weapons of mass destruction, we were making the country safe for democracy and things like that. But when we got there, I quickly found another story. I very quickly found that the Iraqis didn't want us there. . . .

He continued:

[I]f soldiers had come into *our* country and had invaded *us* and had come into *our* homes, then I would have fought back, too. . . . I was more seeing how the war felt from a lot of the Iraqis' point of view.

Soldiers, their families, veterans are speaking out and organizing to bring the troops home now, and should be applauded and supported for their courageous stand.

The final argument I want to address is the idea that the United States has an obligation to the Iraqi people, and therefore has to stay to clean up the mess it has created, to bring "stability" to Iraq.

I think it should be clear that the U.S. occupation, rather than being a source of stability in Iraq, is in fact the major source of instability, and of ongoing suffering.

Washington is not preventing a civil war from breaking out. In fact, Washington is pitting Kurds against Muslims, Shia against Sunni, and faction against faction to influence the character of the future government, thereby increasing the chances of civil war.

We have to do everything we can to force the United States out of Iraq and to support the Iraqi people in their struggle to determine their own future.

The U.S. government has no business lecturing other countries about democracy, when we lack it so sorely here at home and when this country has such a long and brutal history of suppressing democracy around the world.

Does the U.S. government does have an obligation to the Iraq people? Absolutely. An obligation for the crimes Washington supported for years when Saddam Hussein was an ally. For arming and supporting both sides in the brutal Iran-Iraq war. For the devastation of the 1991 Gulf War. For the use of depleted uranium munitions, cluster bombs, and bunker busters. For the devastating sanctions. For the invasion of 2003, and the humiliation and destruction and deaths that caused.

But the only way to begin to meet this obligation is to withdraw immediately — not six months or six years from now, but today.

Malcolm X once said, “If you stick a knife nine inches into my back and pull it out three inches, that is not progress.”

The U.S. first of all has to pull out the knife.

But we should also state clearly that if there were any genuine justice for the people of Iraq, not only would war criminals like Rumsfeld and Bush and Wolfowitz face prosecution for their crimes, the U.S. government would be forced to pay them reparations.

And they would be forced to pay reparations to the families of soldiers killed and maimed in this war. The families torn apart by this war. And the communities torn apart by this war, with its hundreds of billions of dollars wasted for the imperial ambitions of the real powers of this country, the oil interests, the mining interests, the weapons manufacturers.

Mark Twain, a founder of the Anti-Imperialist League, put it succinctly a century ago, when the U.S. was bringing democracy to the people of the Philippines by massacring them in their thousands: “I am opposed to the eagle putting its talons on any other land.”

We should reject the racist and elitist idea that the Iraqi people or Arabs or Muslims need the United States to protect them, to provide stability, to teach them the meaning of democracy.

We should allow the people of Iraq to determine their own future, especially when we take an honest look at what U.S. intervention has meant in the past and what U.S. occupation today really means in their lives.

We can't be antiwar and pro-occupation.

Just as the people of India built a Quit India movement, we now need to build a broad Quit Iraq movement — at home, in the military, and in solidarity with Iraqis who are standing up to an unjust and brutal occupation.

We need to build a new Anti-Imperialist League. The stakes could not be higher.

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