

HOW TO GET OUT OF IRAQ

BY TOM HAYDEN

"When you're in the middle of a conflict, you're trying to find pillars of strength to lean on," An American officer said in Iraq. With those words he provided a clue to ending the war: Undermine the pillars of Pentagon policy through people power.

Those pillars — among them public cooperation, Iraqi cooperation, congressional compliance, centrist caution, military recruitment and U.S. allies — are weakening.

Public support for the war is down, as are the President's ratings. Antiwar Democrats are coming back. Military recruiting is hitting a wall. The strategy of "Iraqization" is failing. The coalition of the willing is disintegrating. America's reputation is tattered.

Public sympathy towards Cindy Sheehan suggests a crucial shift in America's sensibility toward the losses. Usually wars generate a public reluctance to withdraw without "victory" so that the fallen shall not have "died in vain." In this case, Sheehan has led much of the country through a grieving process that demands the truth so that no others will die for hollow or fabricated reasons.

Recognizing its weaknesses, the administration is on a mission of perception management to gain time and resources. Americans are now being promised that Iraq will have a new constitution, democratic elections and, most importantly, that the first troops may be home by the spring of the 2006 election year.

These gestures are the Bush administration's responses to the quandaries it is confronting on the battlefields of war and domestic opinion. They are designed to extend the conflict while appearing to begin disengagement. This ploy is nothing new; we should remember that the Vietnam War continued for seven years after President Johnson was pressured to resign and peace talks begin.

"They just keep getting stronger, *The New York Times* wrote when describing the Iraqi resistance. The *Times* went on to confirm that over the past year the insurgents have inflicted some 65 attacks on U.S. and Iraqi troops each day, with increasing sophistication and precision. Baghdad is "effectively enemy territory with the ability to strike at will, and to shake off the losses inflicted by American troops." American casualties cannot be concealed. In two months alone, 71 Americans were killed in 700 attacks; more than 2000 Americans have been killed, not counting hundreds of contractors. According to Pentagon data, nearly 15,000 Americans have been wounded in battle, more than half of them seriously. Tens of thousands will return with serious mental problems.

U.S. troops cannot hold the territory they occupy — the clearest contradiction faced by an occupying power trying to prop up an unrepresentative regime against a nationalist resistance. The training and deployment of Iraqi counter-insurgency troops — "Iraqization" — has failed so far, according to declassified Pentagon reports. And Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says it may 4, 8, or 12 years — in other words, several more U.S. Presidential cycles.

The most significant factor on the ground is the rise of an Iraqi movement calling for U.S. withdrawal and the end of the occupation. Rather than welcoming such a development, the administration and a media blinded by its own paradigms have ignored the possibility of a peace process among Iraqis.

Congress should call for a peace envoy to begin immediate peace talks with the Iraqi opposition after the historic Cairo summit in November. The three-day meeting was the first attended by leading Iraqi political parties as well as a delegation linked to the insurgents, organized by former minister Ayham al-Sammarae. Overcoming the initial opposition of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari, the conference ended with a call for American withdrawal and an endorsement of "nationalist resistance" to foreign occupation.

The conference will resume in Baghdad in February, where a stronger call for U.S. withdrawal is likely. The February date is consistent with the four-month period that has been established to accommodate Sunni demands.

It is clear that U.S. proposals for token Sunni inclusion have failed, and that the peace deal emerging consists of incorporating the opposition into a new power-sharing arrangement.

If the deal is brokered, many Baathist officers will likely be incorporated into the Iraqi security forces to protect their populations. The Mahdi Army of Moktada al-Sadr, famous for two uprisings against American troops, will be accepted as sharing security responsibilities in areas they represent as well. Earlier this year supporters of al-Sadr collected a million signatures against the occupation in three weeks.

Iraqi elected officials have demonstrated their demand for withdrawal twice before, in a letter from 100-plus parliamentarians in July 2005 — calling for the end of occupation and complaining they were not properly consulted in the United Nation's Security Council's extension of the occupation — and a unanimous September 2005 report by the regime's committee of sovereignty.

The rumblings within America's client regime reflect a widespread consensus on the ground. Surveys taken at the beginning of 2005 show that 82% of Sunnis and 69% of Shiites favored a near-term U.S. withdrawal. According to the State Department's own internal surveys, at least half of Iraqis interviewed say they feel unsafe because of the presence of American troops.

In all likelihood, the Bush Administration is struggling to suppress even moderate voices against the occupation. After all, how would the United States respond to a broad-based antiwar movement in Iraq? Call a majority of Iraqis dupes of terrorism?

Most Americans should be relieved at the prospect of peace talks among Iraqis, including the insurgents, aimed at ending the debacle. The situation calls for a negotiated exit strategy, not Rumsfeld's boastful assertion, "We have no exit strategy, only a victory strategy."



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Nevertheless, the White House plays upon the significant misgivings many Americans feel about the consequences of a sudden pullout. Since Bush has no exit plan, it is important that peace advocates put one forward in the final battle for public opinion.

A provisional exit plan has circulated as a petition to Congress on several peace group websites. Its core guidelines include:

- ~A demand that the United States disavow any plans for permanent military bases or control of Iraqi oil.
- ~A declaration of intent to end the occupation in months, not years, followed by an initial limited troop withdrawal by December.
- ~A request that the United Nations take responsibility for military monitoring and the task of economic reconstruction.
- ~The appointment of an independent peace envoy to undertake the shift from the military model to one of conflict resolution.
- ~Immediate peace talks with the Iraqi opposition, including insurgents, to begin a political settlement.

If these proposals seem utopian at the moment, the alternative is a continuing hell. The peace movement needs to advocate a peace plan, demand hearings and debate from Congress, and hold do-nothing politicians accountable.

Congressional Democrats are beginning to take up an exit strategy, both to put the administration on the defensive and to send a positive message to those who are against the war but worried about the consequences of withdrawal.

The changed atmosphere in Washington is symbolized by the public interest in the Downing Street hearings chaired by Democratic Representative John Conyers of Michigan, the antiwar stances by a growing number of House Republicans and the increasing number of co-authors of California Democrat Lynn Woolsey's antiwar resolution — from 14 to 128. Shortly afterward Representative Maxine Walters (D-California) led a backroom rebellion against Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's leadership, forming an "out of Iraq" caucus of more than 60 members.

Tens of thousands of antiwar demonstrators descended on Washington, D.C. on September 24 for United For Peace & Justice's Anti-War Mobilization, which provided the peace movement an opportunity to further amplify its message. And though the mainstream media attempted to ignore the demonstrations, they pose a real complication to the administration when it seeks another \$80 billion supplemental appropriation sometime after January 2006. At the moment, the reluctance of elected officials to cut the war funds remains the Bush administration's strongest pillar. But by next year's election their numbers and discontent will rise, in direct relation to the voices of protest and frustration they hear in their districts.

A key issue for the antiwar movement will be driving home the budgetary costs of the war to local constituencies in congressional districts. One billion dollars per week could purchase health insurance for 46.4 million people, Head Start enrollments for 27 million kids or 8.6 million four-year college scholarships. Such figures are available up-to-the-minute for every budget category for every state at CostOfWar.com. As people learn the facts being kept from them, public support for further funding will shrink.

Centrists, moderates or national security types are unlikely to take a strong stand on withdrawal. It is more likely that an antiwar majority will grow from the right and left of the political spectrum. Together, critics from both sides of the aisle can overcome mainstream caution. The antiwar movement doesn't need the editorial page of the *New York Times* if it has an alliance with conservative members of Congress and their constituents, or as one White House strategist warned, "crazies on the left and crazies on the right meeting in the middle."

The previous generation of the antiwar movement forced an end to the draft. That generation has become the parents of today's youth, a fact that deeply upsets a Pentagon trying to erase the "Vietnam syndrome." "The Pentagon is especially vexed by a generation of more activist parents who have no qualms about projecting their own qualms upon their children," reports *The New York Times*.

The recruitment crisis is connected to the morale crisis on the battlefield itself. Six thousand American soldiers are AWOL, including 37 military recruiters.

Bush doesn't have the political capacity to reinstate the draft because that would dramatically broaden the antiwar movement. Nor does he have the political touch to convince hundreds of thousands of military families that their sons and daughters should fight a dubious battle because of a back-door draft. The military itself is his weakest pillar.

One by one, the pillars supporting the War in Iraq are toppling. We have all become prisoners, indefinitely detained by a war that was supposed to be swift and cheap.

That doesn't necessarily mean the war will end. It does mean that the administration, in order to placate voters and buy time in the coming election year, is likely to defuse the rising opposition with partial withdrawals and grudging talks. But the administration's main goal appears to be to reduce the war's presence in our lives, to go "off camera, so to speak," as the neoconservative Robert Kaplan advises. This is the Vietnam strategy that was pursued by the current generation of Republicans in their formative years, when the likes of John Negroponte served under Henry Kissinger. It is pursued today in Afghanistan and Colombia, wars with a minimal number of American casualties that are too expensive — too boring perhaps — for corporate media to cover.

Iraq is the great exception, the war that can't be switched off the television. It stands to be the illuminating experience for this generation, the classroom in which the lessons of war, empire and the costs at home will be learned or not.

The way is open for the peace movement — and politicians in the Democratic Party if they choose — to offer an exit strategy and an alternative vision of America's needs to a majority of Americans. Just as the end of the Vietnam War led the way, at least for a decade, for movements supporting human rights, alternative energy development, and open and democratic government, so we are approaching the time when progressives can offer real alternatives to a new generation of Americans disillusioned by needless death in the service of official lies.

*Tom Hayden was a leading opponent of the Vietnam War. He was indicted, tried and finally acquitted on charges of conspiracy to riot during the 1968 Democratic Convention. He later served 18 years in the California legislature. He is author of 12 books and currently teaches at Pitzer College. His article is excerpted from *In These Times* and combined with another article he wrote for *CommonDreams.org*.*

WHAT TO DO FOR PEACE NOW

Democrats and Republicans should be competing to support Iraqi talks at the beginning of the peace process. Instead they are losing the initiative to the Iraqis themselves. The steps to consider are these:

- ~Reduce U.S. troop levels by 25,000 by Christmas.
- ~Support the Arab League's peace diplomacy, including the call for a near-term withdrawal.
- ~Assign a U.S. peace envoy to join the peace talks immediately and encourage the February Arab summit.
- ~Make peace diplomacy a higher priority than military operations.
- ~Place our allies on notice immediately.
- ~End offensive American operations in cities.
- ~Make clear that the U.S. intends to withdraw, keep no permanent bases, and respect Iraqi control of Iraqi natural resources.
- ~Make clear that the U.S. is committed to an internationally sponsored effort at postwar economic reconstruction, without Halliburtons.
- ~Reduce tensions with Iran and Syria in exchange for their support for a political solution.
- ~Adopt these policy guidelines in budget and policy by January.

~TOM HAYDEN

AVAGALLERY

ASTORIA VISUAL ARTS
160 10TH ST., ASTORIA
BACK ON THE BLOCK 2 DOORS DOWN