

War in Iraq

Imperial Death Trip to Nowhere

George Bradford (David Watson)

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The Empire, gorged and sclerotic from its daily gnawing on the marrow of the world, has now called up its armies and declared its “new world order.” Its commander-in-chief, a mediocrity in a civilization of hollow mediocrities, lays aside his golf club and announces a holy war to “defend the American way of life,” its basis in the sacred nectar of capital, the “lifeblood of industry and the Western economies,” oil. Hundreds of thousands of troops, with more on the way, now await their orders to advance to the conflagration. Or perhaps as you read these lines, the armies have already clashed, littering the sand with corpses and industrial junk.

It would be difficult to devise, in some fiction or film, a war more thoroughly and more classically cynical, hypocritically concocted, and insane. The external Enemy—the bone-grinding djinn Hussein, who gasses soldiers and civilian populations alike, who makes roads of the corpses and drives his tanks over them—has been properly demonized...now that he has been removed from the payroll.

Studiously forgotten is the role that the United States—and the rest of the industrial capitalist world, for that matter—played in creating this season’s Hitler. At the very moment when U.S. centurions were flattening the slums of Panama City to root out last season’s Hitler (another former client, even employee of the empire), the White House announced the lifting of a ban on loans to Iraq.

The U.S. was, in fact, Iraq’s largest trading partner up to the invasion. Billions of dollars in loans guaranteed by the U.S. government had been funneled to Iraq during the 1980s, with little doubt that a significant portion went to buy arms and even chemical weapons. When Iraq gassed its Kurdish minority and imposed forced relocations on half a million Kurds and Syrians, the U.S. looked the other way.

When Iraq invaded Iran, gassing thousands of Iranian soldiers, the U.S. provided helicopters, satellite reconnaissance, and other logistical and economic support. When Iraq made threats against Kuwait’s border oil fields because of Kuwaiti sabotage of the Iraqi economy, the U.S. yawned. But when Iraq moved in and took all of Kuwait rather than a slice, the U.S. commander-in-chief denounced “those who would use force to replace the rule of law,” called in the marines to protect “our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom,” and drew his “line in the sand.”

The line Bush drew in the shifting desert sands, as one wit, Harper’s magazine editor Lewis Lapham, quipped, “was the line between profit and loss.” In the first weeks of war hysteria Bush was able to fabricate a consensus for military adventure under the rubric of democracy and freedom. But as the feudal nature of the Saudi and Kuwaiti dynasties, the U.S. ties to Hussein, and the recognition that Americans will die to protect oil companies have all started to dawn on the population, the administration has shifted its rhetoric to the cynical posture of economic necessity. By mid-November, Secretary of State James Baker put it bluntly, declaring the “vital interests” of American capitalism at stake. “To bring it down to the level of the average American citizen,” he said, “if you want to sum it up in one word, it’s jobs.”

Probably never before has a war been justified in terms so cynical. Workers have in the past been blackmailed with loss of livelihood if they would not allow corporations to slash their wages and safety standards as well as

pollute their communities. Now they are being told that to avoid unemployment, they must sell their sons and daughters to the god of war.

Ironically, Hussein's reasons for war were just as explicitly economic. Hussein invaded Kuwait to defend his national economic interests; what Iraq did to Kuwait, western capital now conspires to do to Iraq.

The West masses against the entity called Iraq, but it should be clear what this means in the real world: the massive bombing of Iraqi and Kuwaiti civilian populations, the phosphorous and anti-personnel bombs, the collapsing apartment houses, the millions of refugees, the burning oil fields and ships, the oil slicks.

When the generals and their sheep talk glibly of "taking out" the Great Satan, they never acknowledge the real victims of their campaign, the mother and child beneath the rubble of their house, the conscripts charred alive in their tanks, the hobbled, the mangled, the mad.

In just fifteen years since the end of the Vietnam War, a few Rambo movies and rounds at the space invaders video screen have inured the entire culture to the degree that one can read a passage in Newsweek magazine stating with no apparent irony that in an Iraq war, "The damage would be immense. The United States might have to destroy Kuwait—its oil refineries, its port, and much of its capital city—to save it." (8/27/90)

Iraq is not Panama

The space invaders phenomenon has worked its magic. Americans tend to believe that in war only the faceless other—formerly "gooks," now "A-rabs" (in an environment where anti-Arab racism and violence are pervasive)—are the only ones to die. But Iraq is not Panama. The reality will set in when the shooting actually commences. Military analysts estimate that an attack by U.S. forces "would claim 5,000 U.S. lives and 15,000 wounded in the first ten days of combat alone." (*Boston Globe*) "We are planning for massive casualties," said one officer in charge of a hospital ship. Tens of thousands of body bags (made out of hefty plastic by the petrochemical companies) have arrived in Saudi Arabia. No one on this side of the ocean even bothers to count the Iraqi (or even the allied) dead.

But the most grotesque aspect of the New Order's crusade has yet to be mentioned: the ecological implications. Petrochemical civilization now stands at the threshold of a regional ecological and social catastrophe—massive contamination of the air, soil and waters, massive annihilation by gas, and even perhaps nuclear weapons, of civilian populations, and the rest. And for what? So that global industrialism, led by the capitalist west, can continue its project of heating up and destroying the atmosphere and the basic conditions of life as we know it, through an oil-based industrial growth-driven economy.

Petrochemical civilization is already suicidal, living as if it were the last human generation on earth. (Perhaps the leaders secretly long to join the myriad species their daily business activities send to extinction.) But what a glorious excursion down the chute for those riding in the luxury compartments of this slave ship! What giddy power, obscene profits! So a war to maintain its privilege of looting and wrecking the ecospheric organism called Gaia isn't so much like Nero fiddling while his empire burns, as it is a willful torching of the whole world as the final act of an imperial (breadless) circus.

The war in the middle east is only a continuation of every previous crusade and war against the world in the service of a military-industrial megamachine. Irony of ironies, if the ultimate empires find themselves unraveling in the very desert sands that covered the original exhausted civilizations of the ancient Tigris and Euphrates valley. The faces of the cannon-fodder are as grim as those of the refugees, the cheap labor from the bottom of the oil dynasty's sordid pyramid scheme, boarding ships and planes to be dispersed back to the wretched colonial provinces from which petrochemical capital had drawn them. There is no stake in it for these expendables, never has been any.

Ship of Fools

Nothing good can come of this crusade, this ship of fools. For the Americans, it is only the same old, age-old story, a journey up a river to the heart of darkness—a river of sand, a river of oil, of blood. The computers malfunction

tion in the desert heat, the sand jams the guns and grounds the helicopters, the mounds of plastic garbage from food rations blow across the horizon. It's the lie of patriotism, played out once again in some distant outpost. Youth dying for nothing.

And for the Iraqis, more sacrifice, more bloodshed, more meaningless suffering to sate the blood-drenched god who builds his ziggurat of corpses to erect another billboard of his portrait at the top; who, with Shakespeare's Macbeth, might say,

"I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er..."

except that it's difficult to imagine Hussein seeing ghosts. He builds his stairway to infamy on the bodies of the Iraqi people first.

For the rival empires and jockeying interests, even should the West obtain its objectives quickly, the long-term consequences can only mean mutual ruin. Every conflict, every injustice, every horror will be aggravated and exploded—all the consequences of imperial plunder and industrial distortion brought to bear. It's a death trip to nowhere, and the only near certainty is that such adventures, in the long and grisly run, will unravel the very nation states that embark upon them.

And perhaps this is the only slim silver lining in the whole horrendous nightmare. If things go to pieces, as the death toll mounts and as a draft is implemented in this country (no war of any significant proportions has ever been waged without one), the thin support will evaporate and the possibilities for real opposition, not only to the war but to the system that breeds war, will increase.

As with the ecological crisis that looms over this whole escapade, the resolution will never come from the political and military administrators of the interlocking megamachines; paralyzed by their singular lack of imagination, their cowardice, their greed, by their very conditioning as elites, they are constitutionally incapable of turning their machine back from the devastation it is perpetuating.

Rather, the solutions to the world crisis can only come from the bottom up, from soldiers refusing to fight, fraternizing with their "enemies," from people refusing to work for the war machine or the work machine. In other words, it will come from our capacity to rapidly and creatively mutiny against all the rival nation states, to make revolution not only against the empires, but against the structure of empire itself, against the oil-fueled industrial machine that is undermining the foundations of complex life on earth.

Calling on troops to mutiny and on captive populations of rival empires to revolt must seem mad to those who cannot envision any turn of events different from the current trajectory toward global war or ecological collapse. But we have no alternative. The more we hesitate, the more general conditions for potential transformation are eroded.

With this in mind, we call on the soldiers to refuse to fight, to sit down on the tarmac, fraternize with enemy troops, create committees of resistance. At home, let us build demonstrations and strikes against the war machine and industrial work machine. Let us not go passively to the graves that the leaders have prepared for us; but rather, turn their crisis into our opportunity. Those who come after us will surely thank us for it.

FE note: Readers who have friends and family stuck inside the war machine should send us their addresses and we'll send the FE. Postage money appreciated but not necessary. Readers interested in seeing an anti-war/anti-oil flyer from Detroit, send a SASE or request it with a book order.

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