

# Support the Troops in Revolutionary Defeat

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Fifth Estate Collective

2005

Explicitly focusing their energies on undermining Russian military activity in Chechnya, they declared February 23<sup>rd</sup> as “the International Day of the Deserter” and set up a number of different events, including discussion panels, information exchanges on the draft, hardcore punk shows, antiwar demonstrations, a “Radical Women Against Conscription” rock concert, workshops for international solidarity, a dance party, and a couple of free Food Not Bombs feasts.

Flyers for the events jubilantly sang: “Who will finish the war when the politicians are incapable? The deserter! Who will save his own life, as well as the lives of many others? The deserter! Who is a friend to the people of both warring sides and an enemy of all politicians and oligarchs? The deserter! The deserter is the defender of humanity!”

In every locale, we call for more of the same: deserter festivals in the North America; anarchist street parties against military recruitment and for dereliction of duty; safe houses for deserters and resisters. This is only the beginning. Only a lack of imagination prevents us from rekindling and refurbishing the tactic of revolutionary defeatism for use by anti-authoritarians, anarchists, and autonomists against the occupation of Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism (TM).

Revolutionary defeatism—the idea that the social and economic ruptures that accompany military defeats can galvanize opposition to governments and destabilize the coercive capabilities of the State—intensifies and amplifies the prevailing moods of disgust, confusion, and antiwar unrest. In turn, it further weakens institutions of authority and advances rebellion. Opposed to militarism in all of its forms and to any manifestation of patriotism, revolutionary defeatists have always tried to sap war efforts in hopes of transforming conflicts between capitalist powers into a revolution.

As anarchists, can we develop our own version in which we aggressively discourage the war effort among the public and encourage desertions and mutiny from the armed forces? The worsening debacle of the wars around the world and the worrying magnification of national security absolutism in the US inspires us to explore, investigate, and modify the many facets of revolutionary defeatism for use against the Empire.

Historically, revolutionary defeatism during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 helped tear down the French Second Empire and gave rise to the Paris Commune; it was a vital tool for the pre-Bolshevik radicals who agitated for mutinies and labor strikes against the Tsar during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905.

When World War I began in 1914, Russian revolutionary defeatists upped the ante of the Second International’s pacifist antiwar declarations by calling upon the worker-soldiers of opposing nations to stop murdering one another and instead to turn their guns upon their own oppressive masters. Revolutionary defeatism condemned any “defense of the fatherland” in the imperialist war and welded this dissatisfaction to the chaotic conditions of wartime in order to sharpen the edges of the mutinies and desertions that plagued the war-weary Imperial Russian armies of 1916 to 1917.

A year after the 1917 Russian Revolution, returning radicalized German soldiers and sailors joined workers' councils in uprisings throughout that country and increased defeatism's strength as a tool of class warfare. Other post-World War I revolutionaries—in Austria, Hungary, and Latvia, for instance—also relied upon the misery of the demoralized and disenfranchised to parlay military disaster and turmoil into dramatic (though short-lived) social change.

Today, the Iraqi resistance is besting the Bush-Blair axis of evil and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Intelligence estimates recently put the number of anti-Occupation guerrillas at 200,000, of which 40,000 are said to be the militantly operational and the remainder active supporters (by way of comparison, a little less than 500 armed guerrillas kept half of the British Army bogged down in Northern Ireland for twenty-five years).

This insurgent underground is a fluid field: non-centralized, power-dispersed, and vaporously multi-cellular. Most of the fighters are unaware of the identities of those who are directing resistance actions or where their financing is coming from. To make matters more hazy, growing numbers of rebels appear to be acting independently of any network or organization—they are motivated by anger, humiliation, vengeance, fear, or the instinct of self-preservation.

Additionally in occupied Iraq from around the world, mixed bands of Arab nationalists and radical Islamic mujahideen have volunteered to put an end to US and British military rule. All that the Occupation forces seem to be able to do in response to this is to foolishly attempt to replicate the murderous debacles of the Israeli military in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Stark evidence that war has been lost can be seen in the daily piling up of more botchery and butchery—victors do not conduct themselves in the manner that American, British, and the Iraqi quisling regimes have been doing for two years now.

Though the accounts of Executive Branch-approved murder, rape, and brutality go underreported in favor of stories about the faith and moral superiority of those supporting the US Republican Party, proof continues to surface with sickening regularity of systematic torture and extra-judicial murder in US military detention centers in Iraq and of heinous battlefield and prison atrocities by Occupation troops. The scandals have now expanded to include Naval Seal activity and that of British and Danish troops to the point where the realization is quite stark that torture is not an “aberration,” but rather, standard operating procedure.

None of the White House's schemes for colonizing Iraq have been achieved. The efforts to reconstruct Iraq as a utopia of neoliberal corporate capitalism foundered haplessly for a long time before finally sinking from sight, leaving 70% unemployment, a direly inadequate food rationing program leftover from Saddam Hussein's regime, and substantial increases in maternal mortality rates, acute malnutrition, and water-borne diseases.

The poorly-trained Iraqi security forces are responsible for a growing number of civilian massacres, and as exhausted and overstretched US troops depend more and more upon dumpster diving for weapons, boots, and armor plating for survival, there are growing indications that hundreds of millions of dollars have enriched no-bid corporate contractors through fraud, misappropriated funds, and globalized war profiteering. Perhaps most telling of all, the seven-mile highway from the Green Zone to Baghdad International Airport (once dubbed “Bush International”) continues to be a lethal obstacle course of car bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, snipers, and roadside explosives. The highway was declared off-limits for use by civilian personnel—how can anyone reasonably talk about the “new free Iraq” when the occupation troops who have been on the ground for two years cannot even provide safe passage for travelers along a four-lane strip of tarmac leading to the airport?

In short, the failure of the Occupation's war machine appears glaringly apparent to anyone looking outside the bubble of “freedom is on the march” jibber-jabber absurdly regurgitated at optimistic press-conferences by the murderous clowns of the Bush crime syndicate. Facts, after all, are stubborn things.

It is tempting for those who study the past to describe the war in Iraq as some horrible mutation of the bloody battles for Stalingrad (1942), Algiers (1957), and Hue (1968), situations where ordinary people armed themselves and ultimately prevailed against the viciously smug technological superiority of invaders. Or is Grozny a better analogy for the urban chaos in Najaf, Fallujah, Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad?

As a comrade recently pointed out, it was common to hear it said in the late 1990s that the war in Chechnya was Russia's Vietnam, but now it must be said that the war in Iraq has become the USA's Chechnya. All said, “Operation:

Iraqi Freedom” is an ugly calamity whose escalating downward spiral into dismal failure could even eclipse the monstrous futility and waste of the twenty-five years of US military adventurism in Vietnam.

But sitting on the sidelines and cheering for the inevitable unfolding of the slow, fetid entropy of a US military failure in Iraq will not suffice. It is crucial that this be recognized, represented, and remembered as a defeat. Amid the backwash of stupid triumphalist fantasy, jingoistic self-absorption, and pathological denial that characterizes mainstream public discourse in the US about the war, it would be easy enough for the delusional four-flushers and professional swindlers of the Republican and Democratic parties to insist that a profound military loss is, in actuality, a credible and admirable victory for the forces of Good.

A reanimated and newly-designed revolutionary defeatism for anarchists today would necessarily focus on the weakest link in the US war machine: troop morale. Forces are stretched to the breaking point in Iraq, and the Pentagon is currently looking to overtax the reserves to the point where the system collapses, a situation where the reinstatement of conscription can occur in the name of national defense. But in the last eight months, soldiers have filed lawsuits over the military’s “stop-loss” orders and the routine extension of tours of duty; they have refused to go on missions deemed too dangerous, and they have publicly humiliated government officials during hollow military base pep rallies to rousing applause. Troops are committing suicide in Iraq to prevent their having to stay on for another year in this war. In one of the more grotesque Catch-22 episodes of the government’s “support our troops” hypocrisy, the Pentagon recently announced the start of a new rehabilitation program for maimed soldiers intended to return them to the battlefields of Iraq with weapons-compatible prosthetics to serve out their hitch rather than discharging them.

As revolutionary defeatists, we can take steps to organize the pessimism and disillusionment of the US armed forces and engage in counter-recruitment work and direct action to stem the flow of fresh meat for the slaughter.

Because we oppose militarism in all its forms, revolutionary defeatism is a preferable alternative to allying with Iraqi resistance groups whose reactionary religious, nationalist, or statist agendas run contrary to what we strive for.

On December 21, a suicide bomber from the Jaish Ansar al-Sunnah insurgency group killed thirteen US soldiers at a military base cafeteria in Mosul; that same day, sixteen children in Baghdad froze to death because of ever-dwindling supplies of electricity and kerosene that have been afflicting that city since the US occupation began. For the Iraqi children who slowly died of exposure while under US military rule, and not for the sick, selfish blaze-of-glory martyrdom fantasies of violent fundamentalist Sunni extremists, we work. We visualize the downfall of the US military in the Middle East.

We want to be sure that the Vietnam Syndrome—the supposed reluctance of the US government to militarily pursue its interests for fear of the sharp social divisions and political criticism that grows exponentially with the number of US casualties—will be superseded in the collective American psyche by an even more traumatic and debilitating Iraq Syndrome. It is only by insisting upon and emphasizing the magnitude of the failures, carnage, and waste in Iraq that we can prevent the revisionist patriotic publicity campaigns that will inevitably follow the US military defeat there.

Among other things, we can help to update, agitate, and disseminate important information about instances of desertion (more than 5,500 servicemen have failed to report for duty since the war started in Iraq; another 1,700 have deserted their posts in Iraq itself). We can make the necessary connections in order to learn more about soldiers’ workplace organizing and sabotage and about mutinies on bases and in the field so that we can help spread the word. As some of us did during the 1990 Gulf War, our collectives can provide safe houses for AWOL soldiers in the US.

We can network with underground railroads in order to provide safe passage out of the country (take care: the Pentagon posts the names of deserters on the “wanted” lists of the FBI, state police, and border patrols). Revolutionary defeatist support of military desertions and mutinies can be spread to the troops on the street, handed out in bus and train stations, graffitied on walls, scribbled on paper currency with Sharpies, and posted on the internet. Deserter Festivals are just one way to reach out to potentially noncompliant and disobedient soldiers and to knit together strands of solidarity with other anti-militarists.

What David Watson wrote in the pages of *Fifth Estate* fourteen years ago during the first Gulf War applies equally to our circumstances today: “For its own sake as a society, America should lose this war. Defeat does not

guarantee anything, to be sure, but it slows the Empire down, and leaves a small possibility that the automata will be shaken from their somnambulance, humanized, made capable of responding once again to the suffering of the whole world. It is only a possibility, of course; defeat guarantees nothing.” But it is where we must start. No more Iraqs, no more Vietnams.

# **fifth Estate**

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/368-369-spring-summer-2005/support-troops-revolutionary-defeat>  
Fifth Estate #368-369, Spring-Summer, 2005

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